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Science Fiction

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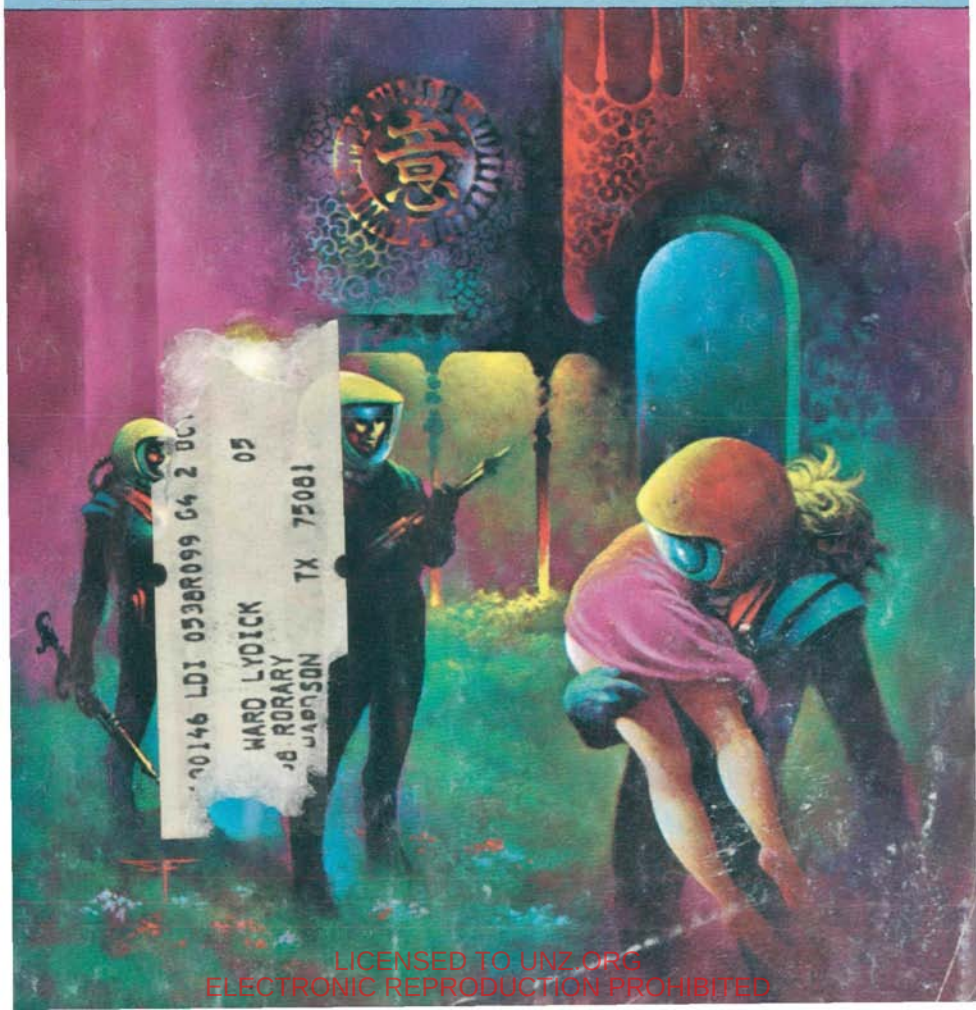
Greg Benford: *THE STARS IN SHROUD*

plus FABIAN CHERRYH *CLOSE ENCOUNTERS*



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Guest Editorial

Harlan Ellison has always been a controversial figure in science fiction, and even as Guest of Honor at the World Science Fiction convention this Labor Day weekend in Phoenix, he isn't about to change. We offer his thoughts on an sf con in an anti-ERA state as a public service, and invite comments. j.j.p.

A STATEMENT OF ETHICAL POSITION

IT IS NOT ENOUGH to talk the talk; in this life we must walk the walk, as well. Otherwise we are lip-service hypocrites.

That is the basic position.

What it refers to, is not quite so simplistic. In point of fact, the situation to which that position speaks puts me—as they say—between a rock and a very hard place, indeed.

I am very much in favor of the Equal Rights Amendment.

Arizona is one of the states that has not ratified the ERA.

I think this is a bad thing.

I think the reasons *behind* the non-ratification in Arizona are even more dangerous than that they contribute to the failure of the ERA. They are shadowy reasons that go directly to the heart of the separation of Church and State in America. Arizonians will understand what I'm saying, though non-residents may find that an obscure reference. Please forgive the awful obscurantism; I do it purposely to avoid lawsuits.

But, as I boycotted the Miami WorldCon in large part because of the Anita Bryant influence in Dade County and Florida's position on the ERA, so should I now refuse to appear in Phoenix for the same reason. By turning down the accolade of being the 1978 WorldCon's Guest of Honor—something that caps my 25 years as fan and professional in the field—I would cause myself great unhappiness . . . but I'd be able to look in the mirror without flinching, and would be able to continue to think of myself as an honorable person. That was to have been my course of action.

But there are considerations that make such a decision extremely difficult. First, I accepted the Guest of Honorship several years before NOW and the pro-ERA forces began their economic boycotts of states where ratification had been withheld. I accepted in good faith, and to weasel out today would be unethical in *that* respect. Second, though this is something in which *I* passionately believe, I don't think I have the right to morally blackmail

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the Iguanacon Committee that may *not* feel as I do, though I've been advised many of the members are in accord.

If I were to vacate the Guest of Honor slot, I would also have to take advertisements in *Locus, Galaxy, F&SF, Analog, UnEarth, Galileo, Science Fiction Review* and any other platforms of mass communication available to me, such as the NBC Tomorrow Show, etcetera, where my position could be explicated. I would have to urge those who might be coming to Phoenix in part because I would be there, to stay away . . . not to bring money into Arizona . . . to show the state legislature that there is an economic club that would be used against *any* state that fails to offer women equal rights.

I would do that, at my own expense. It would be the logical extension of my decision.

But there is no way of ignoring the ugly reality that such actions would very likely damage the WorldCon, as well as the good and decent fans who have worked so long and hard to put the Inguanacon together. It would certainly cost them financially. They cannot get out of the contract with the convention hotel, they cannot move the convention to another state, and I would thus be bludgeoning innocent people with *my* ethical imperatives.

I would be playing with their lives.

Which would be unconscionably immoral.

Rock. Very hard place.

When I thought all this out, I went to wiser heads for guidance. They have given it freely. Ursula Le Guin, Joanna Russ, Greg Brown who is head of the Inguanacon Committee, Vonda McIntyre, Marion Zimmer Bradley and Susan Wood have suggested alternatives to the extreme position. One of these alternatives seems both salutary and directly in service of the commonweal.

It is this:

I will come to the Convention as Guest of Honor, but I will do it in the spirit of making the Convention a platform for heightening the awareness of fans and Arizona as a whole to the situation. I will do this because I feel I must, but in a way that will minimize any crippling of the convention.

I will coordinate with the National Organization for Women (NOW), the pro-ERA elements in Arizona, and the convention committee itself, of course. I will take every possible public relations and promotional opportunity to publicize the situation. I have been assured by the Executive Committee of the Inguanacon that there will be time for publicity and discussion of this most urgent problem, that there will be no sexist entertainment at the convention, and that Phoenix and the state will be apprised of the economic imperatives that obtain.

In this way, I will attempt to make the best of an untenable moral situation. I urge others to assist me in this. I suppose in some ways I'm trying to have my cake of conscience and eat it, too; but dammit, I can't think of any other way out of this bind in which my beliefs have put me, without hurting innocent people.

As for those who will begin the

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barrage of flak, and I expect no less for assuming such a position, may I just remind them that there is recent precedent for utilizing a WorldCon for moral ends: Bob Heinlein believes passionately in the drive to obtain blood, and the conventions have been used as platforms to publicize that drive. What Bob has done is use himself as a loss-leader; I am doing the same. I'm uncomfortable leading *anybody*'s parade, but I find myself in the barrel and *not* to do it would be cowardly. I can stand the flak, and the more the better, because it only serves to raise into higher profile the basic problem.

As for those who share my belief that the ERA is a vitally important issue and must not be allowed to be killed by intransigence or by reactionary religious elements in the Arizona state legislature, I suggest fans coming to the convention figure out ways to withhold money from the state as much as possible. The Convention Committee should assemble a list of acceptable campsites for those fans who prefer to stay elsewhere than in the convention hotel. I will be one of those people. You are invited to stop by my tent, wherever it might be. But more: bring your own food. Set up feeding arrangements with local fans. Don't shop in the stores. Spend your money with the out-of-state dealers in the huckster rooms, but stay away from the tourist facilities. None of this is easy, but who ever said that taking a moral stand was going to be pleasureable?

In short, let's *just for once,* in the world of sf, walk the walk, and not just talk the talk. For decades sf has trumpeted about Brave New Worlds and what Slanlike futuristic thinkers we are, how humanistic sf is, how socially conscious we are, how sf stories can deal with delicate social issues that mimetic fiction is afraid to talk about. And yet, on the whole, sf fans and pros live in Never-Never Land when it comes to taking part in the pragmatic world around them; they would rather escape into a realm of creative anachronisms than go to the battlements to fight the real wars; to be precise, sf fans and professionals tend to be terribly provincial about the pressing issues of our times, to turn their heads and say it is none of their affair.

Dealing with far-flung galactic civilizations is great fun, but we're supposed to be *concerned* people. And so . . . at what point do we put our bodies on the line for the things sf says are important: freedom, equality, living at one with our planet, free speech, intellectual awareness, courage, the best possible condition of life for people?

Can we continue to deal with sf as merely escapist fiction, pointless, mindless entertainment, no nobler than trash novels or tv sitcoms, when we howl in outrage at reviewers and critics who accuse the genre of being no more than that? Can we permit the gap between what we *say* we are, and what we *really* are, to exist? Or is this, perhaps, a moment when we can make a brave statement with our fiction, our literary love, our bodies, and our annual World gathering?

Arizona, the WorldCon and I offer you this opportunity.

—Harlan Ellison

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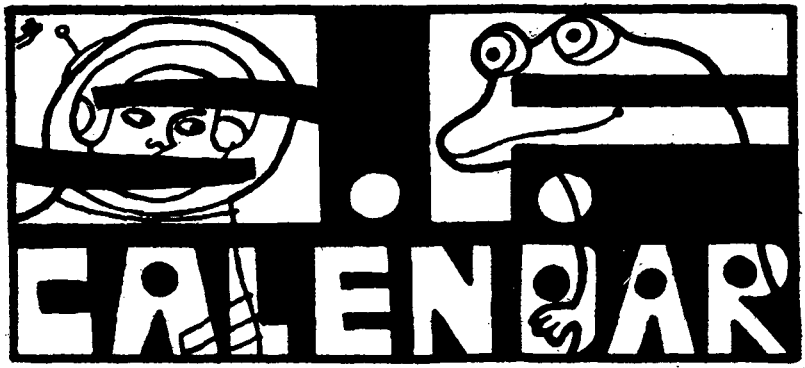

MAY 26-9. DISCLAVE. Sheraton Park Hotel, Washington, D.C. Pro GoH: Wilson Tucker. Fan GoH: Bob Tucker. Membership: $3 until May 15, $5 after. For info write: Alexis A. Gilliland, 4030 8th St. South, Arlington, Va., 22204

JUNE 2-4. DEEPSOUTH CON XVI. Riviera Hyatt House, Atlanta, Ga. Writer GoH: Clifford D. Simak. Artist GoH: Gahan Wilson. MC: Kelly Freas. Membership: $7.50 until June 1, $10 at door. For info write: Heritage Press Inc., Richard Garrison or Ginger Kaderabek, P.O. Box 721, Forest Park, Ga., 30050

JUNE 2-4. X-CON. Holiday Inn Central, Milwaukee, Wis. Pro GoH: Anne McCaffrey. Fan GoH: Martin Coady. Membership: $6 to April 1, $8 after. For info, write: X-CON, 2739 N. Booth St., Milwaukee, WI 53212.

JULY 1-4. WESTERCON 31. Marriott Hotel, Los Angeles, Cal. Pro GoH: Poul Anderson. Fan GoH: Don C. Thompson. Membership: $7 to June 1, then $10. For info write: Westercon 31, P.O. Box 5785, Mission Hills, Cal. 91345

JULY 7-9. CONEBULUS 2. Syracuse Hilton, Syracuse, N.Y. Pro GoH: Ben Bova. Fan GoHs: Suford and Tony Lewis. Membership: $6 to May 31, then $7.50. For info write: Carol Gobeyn, 619 Stolp Ave., Syracuse, N.Y. 13207

JULY 14-16. EMPIRICON. Hotel Taft, New York City. GoH: Alfred Bester. Membership: $5 before June 30, $7 at door. For info write: Susan Rothman, 35 Seacoast Terr., Brooklyn, N.Y., 11235.

AUG 30-SEPT 4. IGUANACON, 36th World Science Fiction Convention. Hotels Adams and Regency Hyatt and Convention Center, Phoenix, Ariz. Pro GoH: Harlan Ellison. Fan GoH: Bill Bowers. Toastmaster: F.M. Busby. Membership $15 attending, $7 supporting. For info write: Iguanacon, P.O. Box 1072, Phoenix, Ariz., 85001

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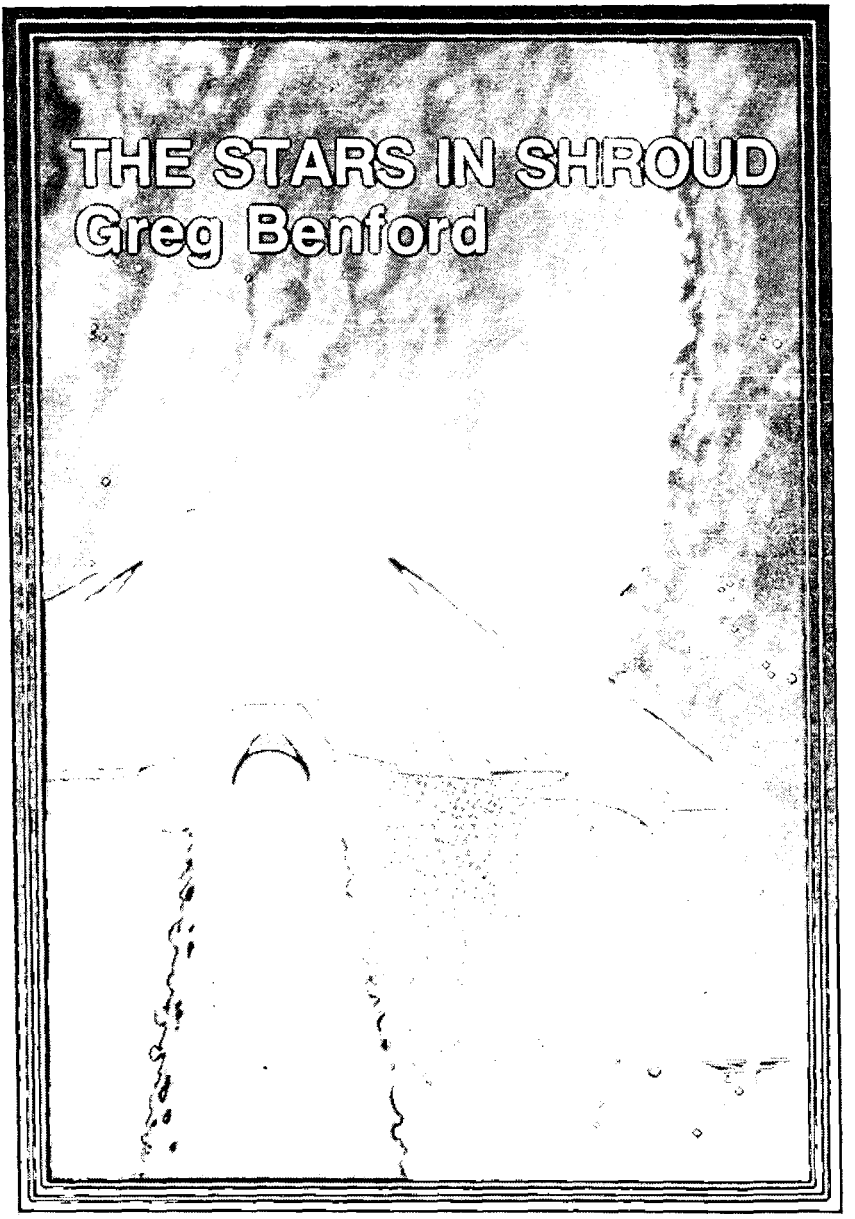

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A Galactic Empire facing an alien invasion. . . . only it isn't the usual kind of empire, or the usual sort of alien or usual sort of invasion!

PART I

1

THE PLACE TO BEGIN is at the bottom of the trough. How long I had gone through the motions, living days as alike as beads on a *konchu* wire, I don't know. We had been in the apartment—such as it was—a long time.

Something happened, about an hour into the morning shift.

Unlike many, I still worked. In the dark corridors no one would notice the red-rimmed crater like an eye at each shoulder and elbow. And who would care? They were too wound up in themselves, by that year, to raise an eyebrow at what had once been a crime.

I drew the line at my waist: no socketing at hips, knees, ankles. Too many and your body won't restore the tissue, even under sproc treatments. So I labored at our sim board, hooked into distant machines, visions of far-off places tapped through to my opticals. I was immersed in the jerky thrust of an assembly network, swinging raw and fragrant dirt to the side with my right arm, while the left chunked organiform slabs down into quick-molding foundation fluids. My glance rippled over the grid layout. Every jointed nerve nexus commanded a linkage in the assembly net, processing new ores into impersonal, blank-walled housing. My sockets linked to machines. I was a neural computer, hired by the hour.

I'm sure it spooked the kids. There was Dad pinned like a zombie to the board, quivering and jerking and muttering for most of the morning. Then I'd collapse and sit, numb and staring, blank-eyed, enough work done for the day to buy us extras.

Their mother would coax them into watching the screen, and they'd leave me be. But this morning—

"*Dad*-dy, why do we have to watch this old stuff?" Romana said, jerking her head up with a regal look.

"Um?" (Still dazed.)

"None of the other cubes in this block even *carry* Schoolchannel any more."

"Um."

"And it's *boring*," put in Chark, his thin voice piping. "Everybody knows you can't learn fast without tapping."

Romana: "We're going to turn out to be *rennies*."

"Rennies?"

"Renegades, Ling," Angela said from the kitchen cloister. "It's the new slang."

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"Schoolchannel makes you a renegade?"

"Well, it really means, you know, out of fashion."

"Um."

Angela came into the living room, wiping her hands on a towel, and looked at me with her mouth tightening. I knew what was going to happen.

"Don't you think they have a point, Ling? Finally?"

"No."

I looked away from her. Chark dialed the volume down on the screen and everybody very carefully sat still. I wasn't going to get away with a quick victory.

"*Dad*-dy . . ."

"If you'd seen that counselor at the Center, Ling. Tapping is necessary. You were out there yourself. You—"

"*Yes*. I was out there. And none of you were."

Romana, who is nine, began reasonably, "The Assembly says tapping is for the common defense. . ."

"It's useless. Pointless. Harmful. There's—"

I stopped. It wasn't going to do any good. Their faces were closing up, going blank. I couldn't tell them the guts of what happened out there. That was buried away in datafile somewhere, sealed against all but high priority access. Some remnant of Fleet training kept me from talking. That, and a curious inability to focus on that past, a desire to skitter away from it.

Angela broke her silence. I could tell from the brittle edge in her voice that the words had been dammed up for a long time.

"*Why* do you tell them such things? They—they'll respect you even less if you try to pretend there's some big mystery about what you did out there. You were just a shuttle captain. A pickup convoy, to get the survivors off Regeln after the Quarn hit it."

"Uh huh."

"And you didn't even get many off, either."

"Something happened. Something really happened."

I got up dumbly and moved toward a cabinet, thinking to get a drink, and when I reached out for balance my hand came down on something on the cabinet. It was the Firetongue Stet. The fifty-centimeter block felt cool and reassuring. Having it here was an outright violation of Fleet regs. Even though it was out of date now, I could conceivably be executed for keeping my commander's Stet after I was court martialed. But I'd substituted a dud, a blank Stet, when the time had come in the official decommissioning ceremonies. To cling to some last bauble of the Fleet officer I had been?

The children were dead silent, not even swinging a foot with nervous energy, the way they get when they sense that the adults have forgotten they're around and maybe a fight is about to start. Angela and I both noticed it at the same time: the children were our lines of communication, now.

"All right. We'll talk about it later," I said.

The kids grumbled a bit and went back to their screen lecture. Angela walked into the bedroom. *Probably to pout,* I thought sourly. One more

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nick in an eroding marriage.

We would talk. Oh yes, there would be a plentitude of talk. I had been a man who acted. Now I was a mumbler, a parody. I had lost momentum, and Angela's coming accusations and complaints would sting. But I couldn't deflect them. Maybe I didn't care to.

I sat down. I hadn't really thought about Regeln for a long time. That seemed all buried now, a subtle and somehow faceless past. I had tried to ride the events as they came at me, to swim between the smashing waves, but in the end I had washed up on this barren shore.

To wait.

And while waiting, to be reborn among the dead.

2

It was supposed to be a quick, daring run: Loop my ship into the Regeln system, drop planetward, scoop up whatever was left before the Quarn returned.

The crew didn't take it well. Fleet had already lost many ships. A month before they had taken us off a routine run and outfitted our ships with enough extras—blister pods for defense, mostly—to put the convoy on the lowest rung of warship class.

But men take longer to adjust. Most of them were still nervous and edgy about the changes. They were suddenly *oraku*, warrior status. They didn't like it—neither did I—but there was nothing to be done. This was an emergency.

I had us roar out of orbital port at full bore, giving the ships that hot crisp gun-metal smell. That perked them up. But maintenance is only maintenance, the hours stretched long, and soon they found the time to think, to wring out self-doubts, to fidget. In a few days the results began to come up through the confessional rings: anxieties, exclusion feelings, loss of phase.

"I told Fleet we'd have this," I said to Tonji, my Exec. "These are traditional men. They can't take a sudden change of role." I let go of the clipboard that held the daily report stet. I watched it tumble slowly in the weak gravity.

Tonji blinked languidly. "I think they are over-reacting to the danger involved. None of us signed for something like this. They aren't men who hired on to win a medal—a bronzer, as ship's slang puts it. Give them time."

"Time? Where am I going to get it? We're only weeks out from Regeln now. This is a large group, spread over a convoy. We'll have to reach them quickly."

He unconsciously stiffened his lips, a gesture he probably associated with being tough-minded. "It will take effort, true. But I suppose you realize there isn't any choice."

Was that a hint of defiance in his voice, mingled with his habitual condescending? I paused, let it go. "More Sabal, then. Require all senior officers to attend as well."

"You're sure that's enough, sir?"

"Of course I'm not sure! I haven't got all the answers in my pocket. This convoy hasn't had anything but shuttle jobs for years."

"But we've been reassigned. . ."

"Slapping a sticker on a ship

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doesn't change the men inside. The crews don't know what to do. There isn't any confidence in the group, because everyone can sense the uncertainty. Nobody knows what's waiting for us on Regeln. A crewman wouldn't be human if he didn't worry about it."

I looked across the small cabin at my kensdai altar. I knew I was losing control of myself too often and not directing the conversation the way I wanted. I focused on the solid, dark finish of the wood that framed the altar, feeling myself merge with the familiarity of it. Focus down, let the center flow outward.

Tonji flicked an appraising glance at me. "The Quarn were stopped on Regeln. That's why we're going."

"They'll be back. The colony there beat them off, but took a lot of losses. It's now been twenty-four days since the Quarn left. You heard the signals from the surface—they're the only ones we got after their satellite link was destroyed. The correct code grouping was there, but the signal strength was down. Then transmission faded. Whoever sent them was working in bad conditions, or didn't understand the gear, or both."

"Fleet doesn't think it's a trap?" Tonji's features, Mongol-yellow in the diffused light of my cabin, took on a cool, distant look.

"They don't know. I don't either. But we need information on Quarn tactics and equipment. They're a race of hermits, indivuals, some say—but somehow they cooperate against us. We want to get an idea how."

"The earlier incidents. . ."

"They were just that—incidents. Raids. Fleet never got enough coherent information out of the surviving tapes, and what there was they can't unravel. There were no survivors."

"But this time the colonists stood off a concentrated attack."

"Yes. Perhaps there are good records on Regeln."

Tonji nodded, smiling, and left after proper ceremonies. I was sure he knew most of what I'd told him, through his own sources, but he'd seemed to want to draw the details out of me, to savor them. Why? I could guess: the better the mission, the gaudier the reports, then all the faster would rise the fortunes of Mr. Tonji. A war—the first in three centuries, and the first in deepspace—has the effect of opening the staircases to the top. It relieves a young officer of the necessity for worming his way through the belly of the hierarchy.

I reached out, dialed a starchart of Reglen's neighbors, studied.

The Quarn had been an insect buzzing just beyond the range of our senses for decades now. Occasional glancing contacts, rumors, stories. Then war.

How? Security didn't bother to tell lowly convoy captains—probably only a few hundred men anywhere knew. But there had been a cautiously-worded bulletin about negotiations in the Quarn home worlds, just before the War. But no one had ever seen one face to face. The Council had tried to establish communal rapport with some segment of Quarn society. It had worked before, with the Phalanx and Angras.

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Among the intellectual circles I knew—such as they were—it was holy dogma. Sense of community was the glue that held a culture together. Given time and correct phase it could bind even alien societies. In two cases it already had.

And it wove a universe for us. A world of soft dissonances muting into harmonies, tranquil hues of waterprints fading together.

To it the Quarn were a violet slash of strangeness. Hermitlike, they offered little and accepted less. Privacy extended to everything for them; we still had no clear idea of their physical appearances. Their meetings with us had been conducted with only a few individual negotiators.

Into this the Council had moved. Perhaps a taboo was ignored, a trifle overlooked. Perhaps. It seemed the mistake was too great for the Quarn to pass: they came jabbing into the edge of the human community. Regeln was one of their first targets.

"First Sabal call," Tonji's voice came over the inboard. "You asked me to remind you, sir."

It was ironic that Tonji, with all his ancestors citizens of Old Nippon, should be calling a Sabal game to be led by me, a half-breed Caucasian—and I was sure it wasn't totally lost on him. My mother was a Polynesian and my father a truly rare specimen: one of the last pure Americans, born of the descendents of the few who had survived the Riot War. That placed me far down in the caste lots, even below Australians.

When I was a teenager it was still socially permissable to call us *ofkaipan*, a term roughly analogous to *nigger* in the early days of the American Republic. But since then had come the Edicts of Harmony. I imagine the Edicts are still ignored in the off-islands, but with my professional status it would be a grave breach of protocol if the word ever reached my ears. I'd *seen* it often enough, mouthed wordlessly by an orderlyman who'd just received punishment, or an officer who couldn't forget the color of my skin. But never aloud.

I sighed and got up, almost wishing there were another of us aboard, so I wouldn't have moments of complete loneliness like this. But we were rare in Fleet, and almost extinct on Earth itself.

I uncased my formal Sabal robes and admired their delicate sheen a moment before putting then on. The subtle reds and violets caught the eye and played tricks with vision. They were the usual lint-free polyester that shed no fine particles into the ship's air, but everything possible had been done to give them texture and depth beyond the ordinary uniform. They were part of the show, just like the bals and chants.

During the dressing I made the ritual passes as my hands chanced to pass diagonally across my body, to induce emotions of wholeness, peace. The vague fears I had let slip into my thoughts would be in the minds of the crew as well.

The murmur in our assemblyroom slackened as I appeared. I greeted them, took my place in the hexagon of men and began the abdominal exercises, sitting erect. I breathed deeply, slowly, and made hand

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passes. At the top of the last arc the power was with me and, breathing out, I came *down* into focus, outward-feeling, *kodakani*.

I slowed the juggling of the gamebals, sensing the mood of the hexagon. The bals and beads caught the light in their counter cadences, glancing tones of red and blue off the walls as they tumbled. The familiar dance calmed us and we moved our legs to counter-position, for meditation.

My sing-chant faded slowly in the softened acoustics of the room. I began the Game.

First draw was across the figure, a crewman fidgeting with his Sabal leafs. He chose a passage from the Quest and presented it as overture. It was a complex beginning—the Courier was endowed with subtleties of character and mission. Play moved on. The outline of our problem was inked in by the others as they read their own quotations from the leaves into the Game structure.

> *For the Royal Courier rode down from the hills, and being he of thirst, hunger and weariness, he sought aid in the town. Such was his Mission that the opinion he gained here of the inhabitants of the village, their customs, honesty and justice (not only to the Courier, but to themselves), would be relayed to the Royal Presence as well. And thence, it is said, to Heaven. Having such items to barter, he went from house to house. . .*

After most entries were made, the problem maze established had dark undertones of fear and dread. As expected.

I repeated the ritual of beads. And rippling them slowly through my fingers, began the second portion of Sabal: proposing of solution. Again the draw danced among the players.

It comes to this:

You are one of two players. There are only two choices for you to make—say, red and black. The other player is hidden, and only his decisions are reported to you.

If both of you pick red, you gain a measure each. If both are black, a measure point is lost. But if you choose red and your opponent (fellow; mate; planet-sharer) votes black, he wins *two* measures, and you lose two.

He who cooperates in spirit, he who senses the Total, wins.

Sabal is infinitely more complex than this description, but contains the same elements. The problem set by the men ran dark with subtle streams of anguish, insecurity.

But now the play returned to me. I watched the solution as it formed around the hexagon. Rejoiced in harmony of spirit. Indicated slight displeasure when divergent modes were attempted. Rebuked personal gain. And drew closer to my men.

"Free yourself from all bonds," I chanted, "and bring to rest the ten thousand things. The way is near, but we seek it afar."

The mood caught slowly at first and uncertainty was dominant, but with the rhythm of repetition a compromise was struck. Anxiety began to submerge. Conflicting images in the Game weakened.

I caught the uprush of spirit at its

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peak, chanting joyfully of completion as I brought the play to rest. I imposed the dreamlike flicker of gamebal and bead, gradually toning the opticals until we were clothed in darkness. Then stillness.

The fire burning, the iron kettle singing on the hearth, a pine bough brushing the roof, water dripping.

The hexagon broke and we left, moving in concert.

3

The Game on our flagship was among the best, but it was not enough for the entire mission. I ordered Sabal as often as possible on all ships, and hoped it would keep us in correct phase. I didn't have time to attend all Games, because we were getting closer to drop and all details weren't worked out.

In the hour preceeding the Jump I made certain that I was seen in every portion of the ship, moving confidently among the men. The number of ships lost in the Jump is small but rising dangerously, and everyone knew it.

I stood on the center bridge to watch the process, even though it was virtually automatic. The specialists and crewmen moved quickly in the dull red light that simulated nightfall—Jump came at 2200 and we kept to the daily cycle. Fifteen minutes before the computers were set to drop us through, I gave the traditional order to proceed. It was purely a formalism, but in theory the synchronization could be halted even at the last instant. But if it was, the requirements of calculating time alone would delay the Jump for

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weeks. The machines were the key.

And justly so. Converting a ship into tachyons in a nano-second of real-space time is an inconceivably complex process. Men invented it, but they could never control it without the impersonal, faultless coordination of microelectronics.

In theory it was simple. The earnest, careful men who moved around me on the center bridge were preparing the convoy to flip over into faster than light. In the same way that a fundamental symmetry provided that the proton had a twin particle with opposite charge, helicity, and so on—the antiproton—there was a possible state for each particle, called the tachyon.

Just as the speed of light, c, is an upper limit to all velocities in our universe, in the tachyon universe c is a lower limit. To us, a particle with zero kinetic energy sits still; it has no velocity. A tachyon with no energy is a mirror image—it moves with infinite velocity. As its energy increases it slows, relative to us, until at infinite energy it travels with velocity c.

As long as man remained in his half of the universe, he could not exceed c. This was a fundamental limitation, as irrevocable as the special principle of relativity.

Thus he learned to leave it. By converting a paricle into its tachyon state, allowing it to move with nearly infinite velocity and then shifting it back to real space, one effectively produced faster than light travel. The study of the famous tachyon cross section problem—*how* do you make it convert, and then get it back—occupied the best minds of humanity for more than fifty years. It also birthed the incredible complexity of microelectronics, because only with components that operated literally on the scale of atomic dimensions could you produce the coherent, complexly modulated electronmagnetic waves that could regulate the tachyon's Jump cross section.

I smiled to myself in the red glow. *That* had been a triumph. It occured some decades after the establishment of Old Nippon's hegemony, and made possible almost instant communication with the first Alpha Centauri colony. Particles can be used to produce electronmagnetic waves, and waves carry signals.

But not men. It was one thing to greatly enlarge the Jump cross section of a single particle, and quite another to do it for the unimaginable number of atoms that make up a man, or a ship.

It was Okawa who found the answer, and I had always wondered why the jump drive did not bear his name. Perhaps he was an unfavored one, though passing clever. Okawa reasoned by analogy, and the analogy he used was the laser.

In the laser the problem is simply to produce a coherent state—to make all the excited atoms in the solid emit a photon at the same time. The same problem appeared in the faster than light drive. If *all* the particles in the ship did not flip into their tachyon state at the same time, they would all have vastly varying velocities, and the ship would tear itself apart. Okawa's achievement was finding a technique for placing all a ship's

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atoms in "excited real tachyon states". In the excited state their tachyon cross sections were large. But as well, they could be triggered at the same time, so that all Jumped together, coherently.

I looked at the fixed, competent faces around me in the bridge. It was a little more than one minute to Jump. The strain showed, even though some tried to hide it. The process wasn't perfect and they knew it.

Nothing was said about it at the Fleet level, but micronelectronic equipment had been deteriorating slowly for years. The techniques were gradually being lost, craftsmanship grew rare, Half-measures were used. It was part of the slow nibbling decline our society had suffered for the last half century. It was almost expected.

But these men bet their lives on the Jump rig, and they knew it might fail.

The silvery chimes rang down thin, padded corridors, sounding the approach of Jump. I could feel the men in the decks around me, lying in near darkness on tatami mats, waiting.

There was a slightly audible count, a tense moment. I closed my eyes at the last instant.

A bright arc flashed beyond my eyelids, showing the blood vessels, and I heard the dark, whispering sound of the void. A pit opened beneath me. The falling sensation—

Then the flourescents hummed again and everything was normal, tension relieved, men smiling.

Ahead, a new star beckoned.

I looked out the foreward screen and saw the shimmering halo of gas that shrouded the star of Regeln. At our present velocity we would be through it in a day, falling down the potential well directly toward the sun. There wasn't much time.

We had to come in fast, cutting the rim of plasma around Regeln's star to mask our approach. If we dropped in with that white-hot disk at our backs we would have a good margin over any detection system that was looking for us.

Regeln is like any life-supporting world: by turns endlessly varied, monotonously dull, spiced with contrast wherever you look, indescribable. It harbors belts of jungle, crinkling grey swaths of mountains, convoluted snake-rivers and frigid blue wastes. The hazy air carried the hum of insects, the pad of ambling vegetarians, the smooth click of teeth meeting. And winds that deafen, oceans that laugh, tranquility beside violence. It is like any world that is worth the time of man.

But its crust contains fewer heavy elements than are necessary for the easy construction of a Jump station or docking base. So it fell under the control of the colonization-only faction of Fleet. They had moved in quickly with xenobiologists to perform the routine miracles that made the atmosphere breathable.

Drop time caught us with only the rudiments of a defense nerwork. There simply wasn't time to train the men, and we were constantly missing relevant equipment. I wished for better point-surveilance gear a hundred separate times as we slipped into the Regeln system.

But no Quarn ships appeared, no missiles rose to meet us. Tonji wanted to get out of the sky as soon

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as physically possible, even though it would've been expensive in reaction mass. I vetoed it and threw us into a monocycle "orange slice" orbit for a look before we went down, but there turned out to be nothing to see after all.

Our base was buttoned up. No vehicles moved on the roads, not even expendable drones for surveillance. I had prints of the base defenses, even the periscope holes, but when we checked there was no sign that they were open. Scattered bluish clouds slid over the farmhouses and fields of grain, but nothing moved on the surface.

There wasn't time to think, send down probes, play a game of cat and mouse. I had a drone massing out to the system perimeter, where radiation from the star wouldn't mask the torch of an incoming Quarn ship, but I couldn't rely on it completely.

"Skimmers ready, sir," Tonji said.

I rang Matsuda on inboard and placed him in temporary command of the convoy in orbit. "Tonji is coming with me. If the Quarn show—"

"Yes sir, I'll deploy to intersect—"

"You will *not*. Give us an hour to boost."

"But sir—"

"If we don't make it, mass out. Don't hang around. These ships are worth more than we are."

Tonji smiled and I cut off Matsuda. The shuttle down was slow and gentle; it was built for cradling flatlanders. I carried the Firetongue Stet. Regeln's sky flitted past, a creamy blend of pinks and blues like a lunatic tropical drink, and then we were down.

The shock troops had cracked the outer defenses, inactivated them, and stalled at the Firetongue perimeter. I carried the Stet in its case, by regulation the only officer who could handle it. The Stet unkeyed the Fleet-wide Firetongue pattern, so that a crew could pass through the man-charring mines seeded around each Fleet base.

My hovercraft pilot was jumpy; we bounced on landing. I was out of the hatch before they got chocks under the wheels, and a Lieutenant came toward me at doubletime. We rigged the Stet into electromag detectors, purged errant traces, and started the men out in single file.

Crystal wafers winked in the air. My ears picked up a soft percussion as sensors probed us. I followed the 3D gridded display, using lifters to bound over null points.

Firelanced air crackled around us.

The men murmured, frightened. Orange sparks played in open air.

I kept on, defusing the nodes of the Firetongue array, widening the corridor.

Behind me something hissed.

A man screamed.

I didn't stop. The Firetongues, alerted, were even touchier.

One, two—the last nodes trembled and evaporated, each a point in space that rippled blue green red and was gone.

Each Firetongue perimeter is the same, so each Fleet Captain has access to all bases. But a flaw in the ferrimemory will cancel the code, kill the bearer. I slipped the Firetongue into its jacket with relief.

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"Who was that?"

"A Corporal," Tonji murmured. "Lost his nerve."

"You—?"

"A Tongue burned away his leg."

"Oh." Tonji could legally have executed the man for breaking ranks in a Firetongue field. I was quite sure he would've, had not the Tongues done it for him. Even a healant unit can't patch a missing leg.

A man came running up. "Had to drill and tap, sir," he said quickly, saluting.

"Blow it," I said. We ducked behind a gentle rise a hundred meters from the portal. I hugged the dirt. The smell was odd, sweet-sour. For the first time I sensed this place as alien, a fresh planet.

The concussion came, sharp as a bone snapping. Debris showered us. I moved up with some men into a hanging pall of dust. The portal yawned only partway open, a testament to the shelter's designer.

Three runners went in with lights. They were back in minutes.

"Deserted for the first few corridor levels," one of them said. "We need more men inside to keep a communications link."

Tonji led the next party. Most the crewmen were inside before word came back that they'd found somebody. I went in then with three guards and some large phoslamps. None of the lighting in the corridors of the shelter was working—the phosphor leads were cut.

Men clustered at one end of the corridor on the second level, their voices echoing nervously off the glazed concrete.

"You've got something Mr. Tonji?" I said. He turned away from the open door, where he had been talking to a man whose uniform was covered with dirt. He looked uncertain.

"I think so, sir. According to the maps we have of the base, this door leads to a large auditorium. But a few meters inside—well, look."

I stepped through the door and halted. A number of steps beyond, the cushioned walkway ended and a block of *something*—dirt, mostly, with fragments of furnitire, wall partitions, unidentifiable rubble—rose to the ceiling.

I looked at Tonji, questioning.

"A ramp downward starts about there. The whole auditorium is filled with this—we checked the lower floors, but the doors off adjacent corridors won't open."

"How did it get here?"

"The levels around the auditorium have been stripped bare and most of the walls structure torn out, straight down to the bedrock and clay the base was built on. Somebody carted a lot of dirt away and dumped it in here." He glanced at me out of the corner of his eyes.

"What's that?" I pointed at a black oval depression sunk back into the grey mass of dirt, about two meters off the floor.

"A hole. Evidently a tunnel. It was covered with an office rug until Nahran noticed it." He gestured back at the man in the dirty uniform.

"So he went inside. What's there?"

Tonji pinched his lip with a well-manicured thumb and forefinger. "A man. He's pretty far

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back, Nahran says. That's all I can get out of Nahran, though—he's dazed. The man inside is hysterical. I don't think we can drag him out through that hole, it's too narrow."

"That's all? One man?"

"There might be a lot of people inside there. We've heard noises out of several of these holes. I think this thing that fills the auditorium is honeycombed with tunnels. We've seen the entrance of several more from the balcony above."

I checked the time. "Let's go."

Tonji turned and started back through the door.

"No, Mr. Tonji. This way."

For a second he didn't believe it, and then the glassy impersonal look fell over his face. "We're both going to crawl in there, sir?"

"That's right. It's the only way I can find out enough to make a decision."

He nodded slowly. We spent a few minutes arranging details, setting timetables. I tried to talk with Nahran while I changed into a tight pullover suit. He couldn't tell me very much. He seemed reticent and slightly dazed. Something had shocked him.

"Follow immediately after me, Mr. Tonji." We both carefully emptied out pockets; the passage was obviously too narrow to admit anything jutting out. Tonji carried the light. I climbed up onto the slight ledge in front of the dark oval. I looked across the slate grey face of the thing. It was huge.

I waved with false heartiness and began working my legs into the hole.

I went straight down, into nightmare.

4

My thighs and shoulders rubbed as gravity slowly tugged me down the shaft. I held my arms above my head, close together. There wasn't room to keep them at my sides.

Cracks slid by. Glistening mud. Pebbles.

After a moment my feet touched, scraped, then settled on something solid. I felt around with my boots and for a moment thought it was a dead end. But there was another hole in the side, off at an angle. I slowly twisted until I could sink into it up to my knees. Hands rasped on broken stone.

I looked up. It wasn't more than five meters to the top of the shaft, but I seemed to have taken a long time to get this far. I could see Tonji slowly settling down behind me, towing a light above his head.

I wriggled into the narrow side channel, grunting and already beginning to hate the smell of packed dirt and garbage. In a moment I was stretched flat on my back, working my way forward by digging in my heels and pushing with my palms against the walls.

The ceiling of the tunnel brushed against my face in utter blackness. I felt the oppressive weight of the packed dirt crushing down on me. My own breath was trapped in front of my face and I could hear only my own gasps, amplified.

"Tonji?" I heard a muffled shout in reply. Light licked the tunnel in front of me. I noticed a large rock embedded in the side. The auditorium was filled with a skeleton of stone that supported the packed soil.

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I came to a larger space and was able to turn around to enter the next hole head first. The entrance was wide but quickly narrowed. I felt ooze squeeze between my fingers. The walls pressed down. Some of the clay had turned to mud.

A chill seeped up my legs and arms as I inched foreward. I twisted my shoulder blades and pulled with my fingers. The going was easier because the passage tilted slightly downward, but the ooze sucked at me.

I wondered how a man could have gotten in here. Or out.

We know why you're here, though, don't we, Ling? Your lust to prove yourself? To be at the center of action? Captains stay in the rear, Ling. . .

With every lunge forward my chest scraped against the sides, rubbing the skin raw and squeezing my breath out. It seemed just possible that I could get through.

Tonji shouted. I answered. The reply was muffled against the wall. I wondered if he had heard. I could feel the irregular bumps in the wall with my hands. I used them to mark how far I had come.

Progress was measured in centimeters, then even less. My forearms began to go stiff and numb. I should never have come down here. Foolish, foolish. But I wanted to know—

A finger touched the wall, found nothing. I felt cautiously and discovered a sudden widening in the tunnel. At the same instant there came a scraping sound in the night ahead of me, the sound of something being dragged across a floor. It was moving away.

I got a good grip on the opening, pushed—and was through.

I rolled to the side, hugged the wall. Flickers of light from Tonji showed a small, rectangular room.

No one in it. A row of darkened holes sank into the opposite face.

Tonji wriggled through the passage, breath steaming in the cold air. His lamp poked yellow in my eyes, though it was on low beam.

I found I could get to my knees without bumping my head. I stretched out my cramped legs. Rubbed them to start circulation. Looked around. Wary.

"Nothing here," he said in a hoarse whisper.

"Maybe. Throw the beam on those holes."

He played it across the opposite wall.

A shrill scream.

A head of filthy hair wrenched further back into the uppermost hole.

I started toward him on hands and knees and stopped almost immediately. The floor below the holes was strewn with excrement and trash. Tonji swallowed and looked sick.

After a moment I moved forward. My boot rattled an empty food tin. I could barely see the man far back in his hole.

"Come out. What's wrong?"

The man pressed himself further in. I picked my way toward him. He whimpered, cried, hid his face from the light.

"He won't answer," Tonji said.

"I suppose not." I stopped and looked at some of the other holes. The sour reek on this side of the room was intolerable. I hadn't

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noticed it in the tunnel because there was a cool draft blowing from one of the holes in the wall. It kept the air in the room circulating away from the tunnel we'd used.

"Flash the light up there," I said.

A human hand hung out of one of the holes.

Cloth and sticks had been stuffed into the opening to try to keep in the smell.

There were other holes like it. Some others were packed with food, most of it partially eaten.

"Can . . . we go back?" Tonji asked.

I ignored him. I scrabbled closer to one of the openings with a larger mouth. Dank, clammy air. In the empty silence I could hear the faint echoes of wailing and sobbing from further inside. They mingled together in a dull hum of despair.

"Bring the light."

"I think it's getting colder in here, sir." He hesitated a moment and then duck-walked closer.

The man was still moaning to himself in his hole. I clenched my jaw muscles in involuntary revulsion and with an effort of will reached out and touched him. He cringed away, burrowing down, sobbing with fear.

There was part of a sleeve left on his arm—the light blue cloth of the Fleet. I looked back at the tunnel we'd just used and estimated the difficulty of pulling a struggling man through it. The phoslamp struck a rainbow from an oily rivulet.

"We've not going to get any more out of this," I said.

The cold clung to my limbs again, but Tonji was sweating. His eyes darted as if expecting attack. The silence was oppressive. I seemed to hear more clearly now the convulsive sobbing from further inside the mount.

I motioned quickly to Tonji. We pressed ourselves back into the tunnel. I made as rapid progress as I could, with him scrambling close at my heels.

The dead weight squeezed us with rigid jaws. I tried to notice markings on the sides that would measure how far we had come, but I began to get confused. Fingers scraped on crumbling rock.

It took me a moment to realize the air was definitely worse. It clung in my throat and I couldn't get enough. My chest was caught in the tunnel's vice and my lungs would never fill.

Between wrigglings to squirm up the slight grade I stopped to listen for sounds from the men at the entrance. Nothing. The long tunnel pressed at me. I gave myself over to an endless series of pushing and turning, rhythmically moving forward against the steady hand of gravity and the scraping of the walls.

Tonji's lamp sent dim traces of light along the walls. I noticed how smooth they were. How many people had worn them down? How many were in here?

And, God, *why?*

The tunnel began to narrow. I got through one opening by expelling all my breath and pushing hard with my heels. Coming in hadn't seemed this hard.

Gravel bit my thigh.

Boots slipped on slime.

An open space temporarily eased

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the pressure, and then ahead I saw walls narrowing again. I pushed and turned, scrabbling on the slick dirt with all my strength. A flicker of light reflected over my shoulder. I could see the passage closing even further.

Impossible. A massive hand was squeezing the life out of me and my mind cluthced frantically at an escape. The air was positively foul. I felt ahead and grunted with the effort. The walls closed even more. I knew I couldn't get through.

My hand touched something, but I was too numbed with the cold to tell what it was.

"Light," I managed to whisper. I heard Tonji turning, breathing rapidly, and in a moment the beam got brighter.

It was a man's foot.

I recoiled. For a moment I couldn't think and my mind was a flood of horror.

"*Back,*" I gasped. "We can't go this way."

"This . . . way . . we came in."

"No." Suddenly the air was too thick to take it any longer.

I started to slide backwards.

"Go on!" He hit my boots with a free hand.

"Back up, Mr. Tonji."

I waited and the dirt pressed at me, closing in everywhere. It was only mud. What if it collapsed?

Tonji was silent.

After a moment I felt him move back.

I had been holding my breath ever since my hand felt that human foot. I let it out as I scrambled back down the tunnel. The man hadn't been there long, but it was enough. The air was thick with it.

I noticed I was sweating now, despite the chill. Had we taken the right hole when we left the man back there? We could be working our way further into the mound, not out of it.

How long could I take the air? I could tell Tonji was on the edge already. Did we miss a turn coming out and go down the wrong way? It was hard to imagine in the closeness of the tunnel.

My ribs were rubbed raw. They stung whenever I moved. Weight closed on me from every direction. I pulled backward slowly, trying to collect my thoughts. I moved automatically.

After a few moments my left hand reached out and touched nothing. I stopped, but Tonji went on, as if in a stupor. I listened to his moving away, blinking uncomprehendingly at the hole to my left and trying to think.

"Wait! This is it!"

We had both missed the turn, somehow. The air had dulled our minds until we noticed nothing without conscious effort.

I turned and worked myself into the opening. Tonji was returning. The lamp's yellow bite was almost painful. He moaned something but I couldn't understand.

The passage gradually widened and I caught glimmerings of light ahead.

Out.

Safe. Yes.

In a moment I was standing in the vertical shaft. A man dropped a line down to me. My hands slipped on it several times as they pulled me up.

For a few minutes I sat by the en-

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trance, blinking, puffing, numb with fatigue. The men crowded around us and I looked at them as if they were strangers. After a while I picked out a lieutenant.

"Get . . . Jobstranikan down here." Jobstranikan had psychotherapy training. This was clearly his job.

Orders were given. Men scattered. After a moment I got up and changed back into full uniform. A runner was waiting outside the door, his nose wrinkling at the strench I had ceased to notice.

"Sir, reports from lower levels say there are more like this. There appear to be people in them, too. The coordination center was untouched, and it's five levels down. I think they've got some of the tapes ready to run."

I turned to Tonji. "Try to get that man out of there. Do it any way you can, but don't waste time. I'll be in the center."

The walk through the next two levels was like a trip through hell. The stink of human waste was overpowering, even with the ventilation system sighing at full capacity. Arc lights we had brought down threw distorted crescents of faint blue and white along walls smeared with blood, food, excrement.

Echoes of a high, gibbering wail haunted the lower floors, coming from their hiding places. They had burrowed far back into the walls in spots but most of the tunnel mouths were sunk into monstrous, huge mounds like the one above. They weren't hiding from us alone; their warrens were surrounded by piles of refuse. They had been in there for weeks.

Jobstranikan caught up with us just before we worked our way to the center.

"It is difficult, sir," he said. "It is like the legends—the country of madness, possessed by devils and monsters."

Legends of the Riot War, I remembered. A foul time.

"What's happened to them?"

"Everything. At first I thought they had a complete fear of anything that they could sense—light, movement, noise. But that is misleading. They screech at each other incoherently. They won't let us touch them. They cry, scream, and fight if we try."

"Has Tonji been able to get any of them out?"

"Only by knocking them unconscious. One of his men was bitten badly when they tried to drag that man out. Getting anyone out of this mess is going to be a major job."

There was a guard outside the center. Broken bits of furniture and electronics gear were strewn down the corridor, but inside the center itself everything was in order.

"The hatch was sealed electronically and coded, sir," the officer inside explained. "We brought down the tracers and opened it. Somebody must have seen what was happening and made certain no one could get in here before we arrived."

I walked over to the main display board. Technicians were taping the readouts we would need from the center's computer bank, working with feverish haste. I motioned Danker back to duty and turned to the officer.

"Have you got any preliminary

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results? Is there an oral log that covers the Quarn attack?"

"No oral yet. We do have a radar scan." He fitted a roll into the projector attachment of the display board. "I've cut it to begin with the first incursion into this system."

Phosphors dimmed. The green background grid of a sensor scan leaped into focus. The relative locations of the other planets in the Regeln system winked purple—lumps of cold rock, mostly—and a small Quarn dot moved on the perimeter of the screen, glowing a soft red.

"They took their time getting here, apparently." The projection rate increased. More dots joined the first to form a wedge-shaped pattern. A blue line detached itself from the center of the screen and shot outward, shrinking to a point: a defensive move from Regeln.

"All available missles seem to have been fired. The Quarn took a few hits, but could outmaneuver most of them. I'm afraid we launched too soon and by the time our seekers were within range their fuel reserves weren't up to a long string of dodges."

The red dots moved quickly, erradically, in a pantomine dance with the blue defenders. The distance between them was never short enough to permit a probable kill with a nuclear charge, and eventually the blue dots fell behind and were lost. They winked out when their reaction mass exhausted.

"Except for the atmospheric ships, that finished their defenses. This colony wasn't built to carry on a war. But something strange happened."

The Quarn ships drifted toward center screen at an almost leisurely pace. A small missile flared out, went into orbit around Regeln and disappeared.

"That was the satellite link. They got that and then. . ."

"And then left," I finished. The red dots were backing off. They gradually picked up velocity, regrouped and in a few minutes slipped off the grid. The screen went black.

"That is all we have. This clipping covered about eight days. We can't be sure anybody was watching the last part of it because the recording mechanism was automatic. It stopped when it ran out of film. This room may have been sealed any time after they launched their missiles."

"None of this explains what happened here. The Quarn didn't touch Regeln, but this shelter is full of lunatics. Something made the Quarn stop their attack and leave." I looked around at the banks and consoles. I could feel a tightness forming somewhere. That old feeling of rightness, certainty of position, was slipping away.

"Get every record you can, in duplicate tapes if possible," I ordered, trying to shrug off the mood. The officer saluted and I went back into the corridors with a guard detail. I made a note to get respiration packs down here as soon as possible, and meanwhile held my breath as long as I could between gasps.

The route we took back was different, but no less horrible. Here there were bodies lying among the wreckage, most of them in advanced stages of decay. Two of my guards gagged in the close, putrid

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air of the corridors. We kept moving as quickly as we could, avoiding the half-open doors from which came the faint shrill gibbering of madmen. Most of the bodies we saw had been stabbed or clubbed and left to die. A large proportion were women. In any contest of strength they wouldn't last long, and they hadn't received any special consideration.

When we reached the perimeter Tonji had established, the air improved. Men were moving along the corridors in teams, spraying the walls with a soapy solution.

"The water and drainage systems are still working, so I decided to use them," Tonji said. He seemed to have recovered from the tunnel. "Wherever we can we're sealing off the places where they lived. We can keep the halls clean."

Jobstranikan came around a nearby corner portal we'd blasted through only a short while before. "Any new ideas?" I asked.

"Not as yet, I fear." He shook his head and the long Mongolian locks tangled together on the back of his neck. He wore it in traditional semi-tribal fashion, like most of my officers. It was dull black, in the manner of the soldiers of the Khan and the Patriarch, and braided at the tail with bright leather thongs. The style was as old as the great central plains of Asia.

"I can make no sense of it. They fought among themselves at first, I think, for the bodies we've found are at least weeks old. Since then they've stayed back in those holes they made for themselves, eating the food supplies they'd gotten earlier. But they don't want to leave.

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Every one I've seen wants to burrow into the smallest volume possible and stay there. We've found them in cupboards, jammed into ventilation shafts, even. . . ."

"Signal, sir." We were passing a temporary communication link. He handed me a receiver and I pulled the hushpiece over my head. If this was what I thought it was, I didn't want anyone to know before I told them.

It was Matsuda. "Our drone is registering approaching extra-solar ships. Preliminary trajectory puts them into the Regeln orbit."

I let out a long breath. In a way I'd almost been expecting it.

"What's their Doppler?"

There was a pause, then: "It is not enough for them to be braking from a star jump. The Specscope says they are on full torch, however. They couldn't have been accelerating very long."

"In other words, this is the same group that hit—or didn't hit—Regeln the first time. How long can we have on the surface?"

"Sir, readout says you can stay down there about five hours and not incur more than five percent risk to the convoy. Can you get them out?"

"We'll see," I said, and went back to Tonji.

5

It was impossible. Using all shuttles and skimmers we saved a little over three thousand, only a fraction of the colony's population. Most of the interior of the shelter was never reached.

As it was, we boosted late and a Quarn interceptor almost caught us. A yellow fusion burst licked at us as we pulled away, We never saw what the rest of the Quarn did to Regeln.

After a few unsuccessful attempts I decided to stop trying to communicate with the lunatics we had scattered among the ships. Jobstranikan wanted to try treatment on some of them, but the medics were having a hell of a time just patching up their injuries and infections, and treating malnutrition.

The Quarn didn't try to follow us out of the system. I thought this strange, and so did Tonji.

"It does not make sense," he said. "We don't know a lot about their drive systems, but they might have a good chance of catching us. It would certainly be worth a try. If you've set a trap, why spring it half-heartedly?"

"Maybe it's not that kind of trap," I said.

Tonji frowned. "Do you mean they might be waiting for us further along trajectory? We're already out of detection range of any Quarn ships, and Jump is coming up. They'll never trace us through that."

"No, nothing. It was just a thought," Not a well-defined one, at that. Still, something was bothering me. It wasn't lessened any when Tonji reported the results from Intelligence.

"The computer analysis of the colony's radar scan is finished," he began. "Regardless of what happened to the colony itself, the machines have a low opinion of Quarn tactics. Regard."

He flicked on a screen above my

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desk and the pattern of red and blue points in a green three-grid began to repeat itself. "Notice this stage, shortly after initial contact."

The blue dots danced and played as they moved in, performing an intricate pattern of opposing and coalescing steps. The red Quarn ships back-pedaled and moved uncertainly.

"The Quarn had ballistic superiority and more maneuverability. But notice how they avoided the Regeln missiles."

The red points dodged back, moving in crescents that narrowly avoided the feints and slashes of blue. The crescent formed, fell back. Again. And again. The Quarn were using the same tactic, relying on their superior power to carry them beyond Regeln attack at the cusp-point. I'm not a tactican, but I could see it was wasteful of energy and time.

"They continued this until the interceptors ran out of reaction mass. If they'd been pitted against equals the engagement would not have lasted two minutes."

I clicked off the screen. "What does it mean?"

Tonji poked the air with a finger. "It means we have got them. Over the last year they've had the luck to hit border planets that weren't first-line military emplacements. We haven't had a look at their techniques because they didn't let anyone get away. But these tactics are schoolbook examples! If this is the best they can do, we'll wipe them out when our fleets move in."

He was over-enthusiastic but he was right. Our defenses were solidly based on the Fleet principle, with interlocking layers of tactical directorates, hundred-ship armadas and echelons of command. It was very much like the surface aquatic navies of Earth history. On these terms, the Quarn were disastrously inferior.

The news should have quieted the unease I felt. Instead, it grew. I began to notice outbreaks of rudeness among the crew, signs of worry on the faces of the officers, disruption of spirit. The tedium of caring for the colonists could certainly account for some of it—they refused to be calmed and had to be restrained from destroying their room furniture. They were using it to construct the sane sort of rat holes we'd found them in.

But that wasn't all. Crewmen began missing meals, staying in their cabins and not talking to any-

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one else. The ship took on a quiet, tense mood. I ordered resumption of the Games at once.

6

We almost got through it.

There was devisive talking and nervousness instead of the steady calm of self-contemplation, before the Sabal began, but the opening rituals damped and smoothed it. I thought I detected a relaxation running like a wave through the hexagon. Muscles unstiffened, consciousness cleared and we drew together.

It is usual in the Game to choose a theme which begins with a statement of the virtue of community, tests it, and then returns to initial configuration, the position of rest. I anticipated trouble, but not enough to make a change of game plot necessary. The plot ran smoothly at first, until we came to first resolution point.

One of the lower deckmen, who had been in the shelter caverns from the first entry, was called by the chance of the game to report the decision. He hesitated, looked guiltily at his card and beads, and then spoke. He displayed a sum of choices which profited a few at the expense of the many.

Something stretched thin in the layered air of the room.

I could feel the group teetering on edge. The men were straining for sense of harmony and trying to decide how to play when their turn came. A bad play isn't unknown to Sabal, but now it could be dangerous.

I repeated the confirmation ritual, hoping it would calm them—and myself—but the next play was a choice of withdrawal. No gain for the individual, but the group did not profit, and the net effect was bad. Fear began to slip from member to member down the hexagon.

The plays came rapidly now. Some tried to reinforce the message, and cast configurations that benefited the group. They were swamped, one by one, and the Game began to fall apart.

I used the chant. Tranquility, detachment. The words rose and fell. Interpenetrating. Interconverting. The mosquito bit the bar of iron.

My own cast held them for a while out of respect for my position, but in a quick string of plays its advantage was nibbled away.

Then the flood came. A dozen casts went by, all having loss of phase. The theme was not gain, but a pulling away from the group, and that was what made the failure so serious. Withdrawal strikes at the social structure itself.

I seized control of the Game, breaking off a subplot that was dragging us deeper. I drew a moral, one I'd learned years before and hoped to never use. It slurred over the resolution of the Game and emphasized the quality of the testing, without questioning whether the test had been met. It was an obvious loss, but that was all I could do.

The hexagon broke and the men burst into conversation, nearly panic-stricken. They moved out of the room, jostling and shoving, and broke up as they reached the halls. A few glanced quickly at me and then looked away. In a moment the only sound was the hissing of the

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air system and the distant quick tapping of boots on deck.

Tonji remained. He looked puzzled.

"What do you think it means?" I said.

"Probably just that the mission was too much for us. We'll be all right after landfall."

"I don't think so. Our Games before worked well, but this one shattered before it was half finished. That's too much of a change."

"What, then?"

"It's something to do with this mission. Something. . . What percentage of the crew have regular contact with the Regeln survivors?"

"With the way the nursemaid shifts are set up now, about sixty percent. Every man who's replaceable for more than an hour on his job has to help feed and clean them, or assist the psych teams who are working on the problem."

"So even though we're off Regeln, most of the men continue to see them."

"Yes, but it's unavoidable. Our orders were to bring back as many as we could, and we are."

"Of course." I waved my hand irritably. "But the Game failed tonight because of those survivors, I'm sure of that. The strain of putting this set of crews into war-status duty isn't small, but we've allowed for it in our planning. It doesn't explain this."

Tonji gave me a stiff look. "Then what does?"

"I don't know." I was irritated at the question, because I *did* know—in a vague, foreboding sense—and his question uncovered my own fear.

"The Sabal Game has something to do with it. That and the way our ships—hell, our whole society—has to be run. We emphasize cooperation and phase. We teach that a man's happiness depends on the well-being of the group, and the two are inseparable. Even in our contacts with alien races, until the Quarn, we spread that philosophy. We try to draw closer to beings who are fundamentally different from us."

"That is the way any advanced society must be structured. Anything else is suicide on the racial scale."

"Sure, sure. But the Quarn apparently don't fit that mold. They've got something different. They work almost completely alone and live in cities only, I suppose, because of economic reasons. Most of what we know about them is guesswork because they don't like contact with others, even members of their own race. We've had to dig out our own data bit by bit."

Tonji spread his hands. "That is the reason for this mission. The Regeln survivors may be able to tell us something about the Quarn. We need an idea of how they think."

"I don't think these madmen will any help. Already they threaten the convoy."

"Threaten? With what?"

"Disruption, mutiny—something. All I can say is that when this Sabal started, the crew was in bad condition, but they could be reached. They still communicated."

"Yes, but—"

"During the Game, though, the tension *increased*. We didn't witness here the exposure of what the

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men were thinking. Their fears were augmented, piled on top of each other. I could feel it running through the subplots they made a part of the Game. There's something we do—and the Game is just a way of concentrating it—that increases the inbalance we picked up from the Regeln survivors."

"But in the Game we duplicate our society, our way of living. If *that* amplifies the unbalance. . ."

"Exactly," I said despairingly. "Exactly."

7

I slept on it that night, hoping something would unravel the knot of worry while I slept. Over a lonely breakfast in my cabin I reviewed the conversation and tried to see where my logic was leading.

A sense of dread caught my stomach and twisted it, turning to lead the meal of rice and sea culture broth.

How can a man step outside himself and guess the reactions of aliens utterly unlike him? I was trying to find the key to the riddle of Regeln with all the elements in full view, and yet. . .

Something formed. I let my senses seep out into the ship, feeling the delicate rhythms of life, reaching for the . . . other. An alien element was there. I knew, with a new certainty, what it was.

I picked up my tea cup and focused on my kensdal altar. The deep mahogany gave me confidence. Power and resolution flowed outward from my body center. I balanced the cup lightly in my hand.

And slammed it down.

Jump was coming. I had to stop it.

I had forgotten that Tonji was to be bridge officer during the Jump. He was making routine checks in the somber green light of morning watch. Men moved expertly around him, with a quiet murmur.

"Great greetings of Morn, sir," he said. "We have come to the point for your permission to Jump."

Then it was already late, far later than I'd thought. I looked at him steadily.

"Permission denied, Mr. Tonji. Ready a subspace transmission."

I could feel a hush fall on the bridge.

"May I ask what the transmission will say, sir?"

"It's a request to divert this convoy. I want the expedition put into decontamination status until this is understood."

Tonji didn't move.

"Jump approaches quickly, sir."

"It's an order, Mr. Tonji."

"Perhaps if you would explain the reasoning, sir?"

I glanced at the morning board. It showed a huge sick report, most of them accompanied by requests to remain in quarters. All divisions were undermanned.

It fitted. In a few days we wouldn't be able to operate at all.

"*Look,*" I said impatiently. "the Quarn did something to our people. Perhaps something smuggled in by an agent. I don't know exactly how, but those colonists have been given the worst trauma anybody has ever seen."

"An agent? One of our own people?"

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"It's been done before, by idealists and thugs alike. But the important point is that when we picked up Quarn ships on our screens they weren't trying any maneuvers to throw off detectors or give false images. It was a classic ballistic problem they presented to us, and all we had to do was leave Regeln early enough to out-mass them. They *wanted* us to escape."

"But look at their maneuvers on that first run against Regeln, the one that ran our people underground. That's all the evidence we need. They're *children* when it comes to military tactics. The second approach was simple, yes, but it was probably all they could do."

"I don't think so. Not if the Quarn are half as intelligent as the rest of our data tells us. So their first attack *did* drive the colonists under—fine. It got all the Regeln population in one place, unside the shelter where whatever techniques the Quarn knew could go to work. What looked like an error was a feint."

"I do not—"

"*Think*. A knowledge of sophisticated tactics is a rather specialized cultural adaptation. For all we know, it may not be very useful in the kind of interstellar war we've just gotten into. The fact that the Quarn don't have it doesn't mean they're inferior. Quite the opposite, probably. Regeln was a trap."

"If it was, we escaped," Tonji said sharply. The Mongul mask descended.

"No, Mr. Tonji, we didn't. We're just serving as a convenient transport for what the Quarn want to get into the home worlds—the

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Regeln survivors."

"But *why*?"

"You know the analogy we use in the Game. Mankind is now, at last, an organism. Interdependent. We're forced to rely on each other because of the complexities of civilization." My own voice sounded strange to me. It was tired and a note of despair had crept in.

"Of course," Tonji said impatiently. "Go on."

"Has it ever occurred to you that once you admit society is like an organism, you admit the possibility of contagious diseases?"

"You toy with words."

I grimaced and went on.

"The survivors. They're enough of a test sample to set it off. An average crew member spends several hours a day with them, and the continual exposure is enough."

"Why aren't you affected, then? And me. And the men who aren't on the sick list—why don't they have it?"

"Minor variations in personality. And there's something else. I checked. Some of them are from the off-islands, like me. We're different. We didn't grow up with the Game. We learned it later on the mainlands. Maybe that weakens its effect."

He shook his head. "Yes, this thing the colonists have is different, but. . ."

"It claws at the mind. It's irrational. We're the product of our ancestors, Mr. Tonji, and these ancestors knew terrors we cannot comprehend. Remember, this is a new psychosis we've found on Regeln, a combination. Fear of light, heat, heights, open spaces. That last one, agoraphobia, seems strongest. The Quarn have worked on a first-class horror for us, and this convoy is to be the carrier."

"A carrier for a mental disease?" Tonji said contemptuously.

"Yes. But a disorder we've never seen before. An amalgam of the fundamental terrors of man. A collective society has the strength of a rope, because each strand pulls the same way. But it has weakenesses, too, *for the same reason*."

The men were watching us, keeping very still. I could hear the thin beeping of monitoring units. Tonji's skin had a slight greenish cast and his eyes looked back at me impersonally, cool and black.

"We're carrying it with us, Tonji. The survivors are striking the same resonant mode with us that the Quarn found in them. The Quarn hit at us through our weaknesses. They're hermits, and they see us more clearly then we see ourselves. Our interdependence, the Game and all of it, communicates the disease."

I noticed that my hand was tightening convulsively on the console at my side. Tonji stood motionless.

"Stop the Jump, Mr. Tonji. And the transmission."

He motioned to an assistant. Jump count ceased. He stood motionless for a moment, eyes wary. Then he took a quick backward step, came to attention and saluted. When he spoke the words were measured.

"Sir, it is my duty to inform you that I must file Duty Officer's Report when your dispatch is transmitted. I invoke Article Twenty-seven."

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I froze.

Article Twenty-seven provides that the duty officer may send a counter-argument to the Commander's dispatch when it is transmitted. When he feels the Commander is no longer able to conduct his duties.

"You're wrong, Mr. Tonji," I said slowly. "Taking these survivors—and by now, most of the crew—into a major port will cause more damage than you or I can imagine."

"I have been observing you, Sir. I don't think you're capable of making a rational decision about this thing."

"Man, think! What other explanation can there be for what's happening to this ship? You've seen those tapes. Do you think the scraps of information on them are worth the risk of delivery? Do you think *anyone* can get even a coherent sentence out of those lunatics we're carrying?"

He shook his head mutely.

I looked across the dark void between us. He was a man of the east, and I represented the dead and dying. In the histories they wrote, the ideals my ancestors held were termed a temporary abnormality, a passing alternative to the communal, the group-centered culture.

Perhaps they were right. But we had met something new out here, and I knew they wouldn't understand it. Perhaps the Americans would have, or the Europeans. But they were gone.

I should have anticipated that the lost phase we all felt would take different forms. Tonji chose ambition above duty, above the ship.

If Fleet upheld him there would be a fat promotion for him. And I stood here, bound by rules and precedents. If I made a move to silence Tonji it would count against my case with Fleet. We were on a rigid schedule of procedures now that the Article was used. Nothing I could do would stop it.

"Mr. Tonji! You realize, don't you, that one of us will be finished when this is over?"

He turned and looked at me, and for a moment a flash of anticipation crossed his face. He must have hated me for a long time.

"Yes, I have thought of that. And I think I know which one of us it will be. . ."

He didn't finish the sentence aloud. He mouthed it, so only I could see his lips move.

". . . ofkaipan."

8

He was right. Fleet wanted to study the survivors in depth. They weren't interested in a convoy commander with suspicions and a theory. And Tonji, a Mongul, had ample political contacts.

We lingered in real space for a week, waiting for the decision, and then Jumped. My trial was short.

9

"Haven't you gone out for your walk yet?" Angela said.

The sound startled me, even though I'd been blocking out the noise of the kids and their viewscreen. She stood in the door of our bedroom, tension still furrowing the

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pale yellow cast of her face. I was beginning to expect those tight, thin lines, now. They appeared often, a webbed design imposed like an delicate shadow on a face I knew. It was a firm and yet subtle face with smile lines around the mouth which belied the slight downturning of the lips, a suggestion of a disapproving pout that always caught me by surprise in otherwise solemn moments, at times provoked a laugh. The face of a substantial person. She had, after all, been the wife of a starship Captain. She'd handled our social roles well, walking the tricky line Offislanders did in Fleet, and supported me in ways that went far beyond the reassuring word and tender embrace. She was a vivid, striking woman, still—or could be, outside these Slots.

"I . . . suppose I forgot. Want to go with me?"

She nodded. I got up. Remembering Regeln and after, living through it all again, had left me in a dull daze.

I cut the corridor lights before we stepped outside our apartment door. We linked hands automatically. Not love; security. I put my right palm on the wall and we inched forward. Terror caught at me, but I fought it down.

Her voice was a hollow whisper in the darkness. "I don't see why you're so set against tapping for Romana and Chark." The words echoed off the glazed concrete that loomed close and sheltering. "With all of us at war, any better training. . ."

"No."

"Without it, Ling, they just fall further and further behind their playmates."

"*What* playmates?" My voice became suddenly loud, harsh. "Children don't play any more. Games take space. They take. . ." I didn't finish. Games took something our children had lost.

We rounded a corner. I stumbled on someone. She was doubled up on the floor clutching at herself in spasms. From her ragged hacking I guessed she'd had an attack and couldn't go any further. We edged around her. We walked on.

"Ling . . . they do play, but not the way we did. They have their games, new ones. You've got to accept the world as it is."

"Accept this crowding? Accept the fear that crushes you whenever you step outside? Accept the fact that a fifth of the population is in the Slots?—and most Slots are worse than these, far worse. Accept that we have to keep on working, even though our guts are twisted up inside? Until we're transferred to some rat warren, when our guts jam up completely, where we'll live in slimy rooms like closets, just like—" I stopped myself from saying, *like Regeln*.

Her hand tightened convulsively in mine. She wept. "You know that can't be helped! We, we are in a . . . stage of evolution. Evolution of society. Withdrawal is necessary. No one says we are doomed, Ling. You're imagining that. We can achieve greater phase, later. Everyone says—"

"And meanwhile the Quarn take one system after another. They've cut us off from many bases already. We can't muster the men to stop

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them." I snorted contemptuously. "Maybe if we're lucky they'll cut us off from our own lies before all this is over."

"Now *that* is completely unreasonable," she said icily, her tears gone. "There are signs of improvement, the news says so. Progress of the, the sickness, is slowing."

"For cases removed at third or fourth hand from the Regeln survivors, yes. They got a weaker initial exposure."

"That's just a theory. You don't *know* that."

"Um." I grimaced in the inky closeness of the hallway.

"It's like all your other ideas, like not letting Chark and Romana have tapping."

"Letting Fleet and the government alter their minds, you mean, with one of their stopgap schemes for increasing the war effort. Let Chark have a frontal tap so all he cares about is torch chamber design, say?—and will never be happy when he's not doing it? 'A permanent career,' they call it. That's right, I won't assent to that. Our children need every bit of mental balance they have to stay alive, to live as a defeated race. I don't intend to rob them of it."

She trembled in frustration. We passed by wan yellow phosphors of the lower-level apartments, the narrow Slots hastily thrown up by an harassed government for some more severe cases. Whimpering came from the little holes where things that had been human beings were curled up into tight balls, desperately trying to shut out the light, the sounds, all of the awful yawning enormity of sheer open space. The terror of openness. Of horizons.

Beside me Angela stopped trembling. She descended into her glacial silence, keeping only a fingertip touch with my hand to retain her orientation. The walks didn't seem to do her any good any longer. I supposed there was a limit to their therapeutic value. I had insisted from the first that we all walk outside our apartment as much as possible. And in truth, we were not as ill as many others who had contracted the sickness later than we. Perhaps we could achieve a kind of plateau. There was something in me that fought against the clutching fears. The sharp words between Angela and myself sometimes even seemed to help, to calm us both. I could not believe Angela believed completely what she parroted. She had been infected by me with more than the Plague. By an unspoken mutual consent we clung to the spaces of our apartment, forced Chark and Romana to live there. At times the children would move suddenly from one room to the next and a frozen terror would slide into their faces, a mask of fear—but we made them stay. Small victories. Stalemates became triumphs.

Even so, the world was not real to me. It was filled with a thousand devious horrors—the accidentally thrown phosphor switch, an unsuspected window in an unfamiliar wall.

Out on the edge of our pitifully shrinking Empire, Fleet played at war with the only toys it knew—ships, missiles, beams—while its enemy (and what was he like, to be so wise?) fought with the only ulti-

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mate weapons between races: their weaknesses.

Men who had climbed to the stars now cowered in Slots, driven by horrors inherited from the first amphibians. I did not feel at home on Earth any longer. It had been long since I had peered out to see the stars like tinsel on sky's smooth cloak.

My life lay now in halls pooled in darkness, in places packed with people whose fears I hated, because they were mine as well.

Waiting . . .waiting. . . The days pressed in.

I would welcome the Quarn, when they came.

PART II

1

Energy resources ran low, so the streets around our Slot cube were unlit. The Philippines are forever cloud-shrouded, so a dark as thick as anger cloaks the streets.

My first excursion outside our cube was at night. I walked a block, no more. I went without telling Angela. The idea alone would have made her face whiten.

But now—

The moment came when the fact slipped free and hung in the brimming air before me, unavoidable now—

That moment when I poked my head throught the forgotten, grim-caked window and, sniffing day's warm musk, did not flinch from the yellow haze outside.

I had been out before at night, yes, telling myself it was not, after all, that odd an event. But now I had gone on a walk from the apartment, down inky halls, and found the window again . . . and day lay outside. And I did not turn back.

I opened the window. I stretched into the stinging sun.

No fear. No tremor of anxiety.

The street lay bare, trash clumped in the gutters like brown snowdrifts. Buildings shimmered in the golden light.

Beckoning.

A draft drew out the scent of the corridor behind me, air reeking of piss and foul food and lives gone stale. Even our own apartment smelled faintly of that, when I returned to it from my nightly explorations. . .

I twisted out of the unguarded window, hung by the ledge, dropped.

Now . . . what? I started walking, savoring the warm brush of air heavy with moisture. I had lived near here as a boy. I had played through the infinite buzzing tropical afternoons outside Naga. The nearness of Fleet Central had made my candidacy for Fleet Academy a virtual reflex; to the adolescent I was then the Academy hovered in the space between myself and a looming future, an inevitable bridge, with invisible tinkling waters below.

I'd rejected the thought of being anything else. So the man is victim of the boy.

Nothing moved on this street. There was a blurred hum of traffic from the center of Naga, but here all was silence. Store fronts were boarded up. Warehouses yawned empty. I walked idly, mind floating and feet free.

"Hold!"

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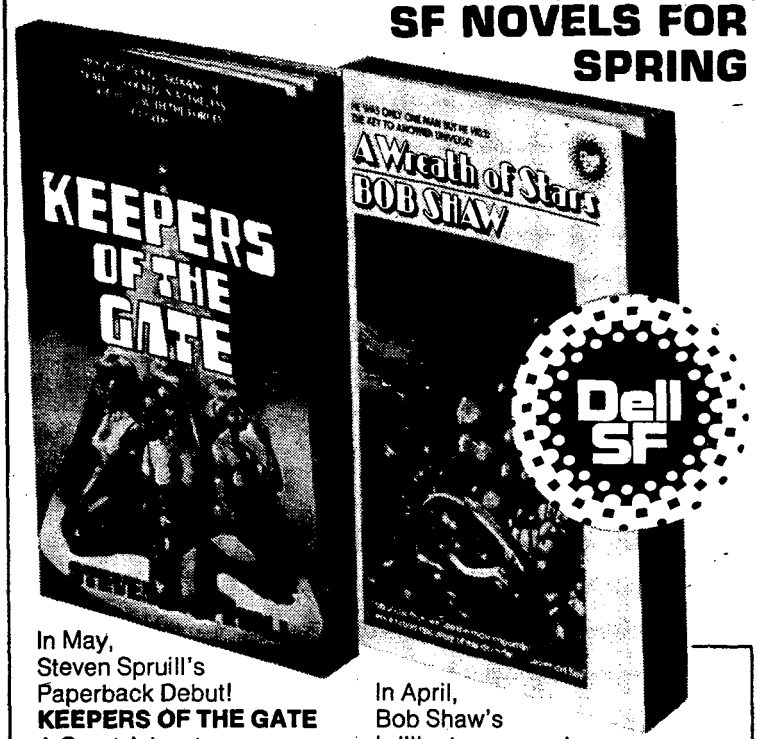

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A man stepped from a doorway. A Fleet officer, Lieutenant Grade Two. He kept a right hand casually resting on the butt of his sidearm. "You are. . . ?"

"Captain Ling Sanjen. Console operator."

"Yes." He fished a note from his breast pocket, checked it. Nodded. "We thought it would be you."

"What? Why?"

"Our night sensors picked you up."

"So?"

"There is a small percentage of recoveries. Fleet wants to talk to you."

"I don't know why. Who says I've recovered, anyway?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Any Slot mole who can stand this sunlight—" he gestured, squinting—"is on his way."

"Well, no, it *is* bothering me." I stepped casually away. "I only came out to get some help. My wife—"

He shook his head. His hand returned to his sidearm.

"Look, I'm just a—"

"I know who are are. You're on the list."

"What list?"

"People we're watching for if they come out of the Slots."

"I'm not feeling very well, I. . ." I wobbled a bit and tried to look dazed.

He smiled. "Nice try, but no bronzer. You're too valuable to let go."

I started to walk away.

This time the sidearm came out.

* * *

Fleet Central was the same: jutting architecture simulating flight, gleaming hallways, padded lobbies, the steady click and bustle of efficient mystery; a steel cathedral.

They kept me for two days before I knew anything more than the patrol officer had let slip. They tested, poked, attached sensors, interviewed me, left me waiting for hours—in a word, treated me like a package of meat in their factory. I learned nothing. I was getting bored and fidgety by the end of the second day, while I waited in a large office, until the door opened and a Fleet officer came in.

It was Tonji, his Mongul mask in place.

He held out his hand. "I am happy you recovered."

I didn't stand. I didn't shake the hand.

"From the reports I gather you have done remarkably well."

"You son of a bitch."

"Quite remarkable, considering that you had no help. No therapy whatever—unless you are lying about that. Some have, you know."

"How did you come by those double stars? Have all bastards become generals, or is it the other way around?"

"I see things have not changed as much as I would have wished."

"They never will."

He gave a small laugh. "You must get over this."

"Why? I was right."

"This is unproductive."

"For who?"

"For you. Surely *I* don't care."

"The past between us isn't dead."

"It is for me."

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I stood up suddenly. "We'll see—"

"How many times you can hit me, before a trooper comes through that door?"

I clenched my fists, judging the distance.

"The answer is, not many. Perhaps three." He looked at me steadily. "Perhaps even fewer."

We stood there for a long moment and something seeped out of me. This was Tonji's game. He couldn't lose it—otherwise he wouldn't be here, exposing himself this way. So the next move would have to wait. How long a wait it would be I didn't know,

"Do not ask for the impossible."

"Don't ask me to read your mind."

"An attitude of—"

"Screw that."

"I doubt that you realize your true position."

"I believe I do."

"Each officer is in fact a supplicant before the Fleet."

"Again: screw that."

"You have changed, Sanjen."

"Just 'Sanjen'? No title?"

"You *have* no title if I, if Fleet does not choose to reinstate you."

"A point. Very well, what then?"

"A Base Commandant position."

"With attendant neighboring ship command?"

"Yes, but that will be trivial. It is the Veden system."

I paused. Veden was an eccentric case among the worlds—a gigantic storage house for the Empire's trade goods, a way station that served the full 200-parsec span of the Empire.

"Why me?"

"The past Commandant died—natural causes, nothing unusual."

"And you don't wish to replace him with a sorely-needed full line officer."

Tonji made a thin, cynical laugh. "You do occasionally read matters well."

I thought a moment. "My family. . ."

"They cannot go, certainly."

"They're ill, yes, but—"

"There is no sign of the Quarn sickness on Veden. Perhaps the Hindics of Deven are immune—" he shrugged—"Who knows? But Fleet will not introduce cases into Veden."

"That is an unusual hardship for a Commandant."

"Who do you imagine you *are*, Sanjen?" Tonji rasped with surprising ferocity. I suddenly saw that beneath the mask he was a man under pressures that abraded him.

"I should take what Fleet lets dribble from its fingers, then."

"Poorly stated," Tonji said, clipping off the words sharply.

"But true."

Tonji said nothing. He stood rigidly, hands clasped behind him, the traditional waiting-warrior stance.

I stood up. "I'll think about it."

Tonji blinked, showing a slight flicker of surprise. These last few moments were the first in the conversation when he did not seem fully confident.

"A jump vessel leaves soon which can easily make a pass by Veden. We need a replacement now. I believe—"

"I'll think about it," I said, and left.

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2

At first Angela was restrained, simmering, saying nothing until I asked her a direct question—*You do understand what I'm talking about, don't you?*—and then as she warmed up, as the reality of my two days' absence became full-bodied in my telling of it (she had thought I was dead somewhere, or scrabbling like a demented animal in a Slot, or simply drifting, shambling, through endless shadowed corridors) the fear settled into her, her eyes seemed to bulge more with each detail I brought out, and the rage steamed up through her and she said, "*No*. You're saying, you mean you'll just, just *leave* me?

"It will enable you, the children, to have a better chance for recovery. Better care. Fleet will—"

"With everything outside collapsing? What use is *that*?" She rose up from her chair, balled both fists.

"And there is duty. Mine. I need to go."

"Do you *care*?"

I stood silent, because in fact I didn't know. Did she?

"No. No," she shook her head.

"Perhaps it's not that simple—"

"After they took everything away from you?"

"The past can't be corrected—" I began, and felt a sudden flash of rage at myself. Tonji had made a similar, scuttling excuse.

"You owe them *nothing*."

"You're right. I'm not talking about doing anything for them."

"Then what—"

"The Empire . . . no, it's not even that. Humanity. I, I think something can still be done for some worlds. Veden, maybe. Then—"

"Ling, even if you *believe* that, how can you abandon us here?"

"I think Earth is safe. For a while, anyway."

"You don't *know*. No one does."

"Right. But I have to follow my instincts."

"Your instincts." She stood there, puffing slightly, her billowy house dress sighing slightly as it moved. "Saving Veden, whatever or wherever that is." She stopped again, just staring at me. Her upper lip was damp with perspiration. I didn't look at her eyes. "Ling, you're not going to do this."

"No. I am."

"You're not."

"I'm . . . I'm cured now, Angela," I said, trying to get some warmth back into my voice, which had become dry and brittle.

"Cured."

"That makes a big difference. In what I can do. In what my duty is."

"Is that it?"

"What?" I wiped my brow, dazed. Even here in our apartment stench layered the air.

"Is that why you're going?" A pause. "Ling?"

"I . . . we'll talk again, later. I need time to. . ."

"To what?"

"To *think*, damn it!" I turned on her. "To *think*!"

So I slammed out of the apartment, banging the door hard enough to wake Chark and Romana, to go for a walk, yes a walk outside in the warming sun, to *think*, and though I did a lot of that in the days

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to come, I really never did understand why I was going, or what this meant to Angela and me, but one fact I never questioned: I was going, yes, of course, I was going.

3

Take a ream of paper, heavy fiber, its threads of rag content webbing the slicked surface—take in the right hand a riff through, a sheet at a time, listening to the *snick* as each edge scraped across your thumbprint, and then go faster, so the *snicksnicksnick* blurs into a high cry, like birds unseen above the clouds. There, that's it—the way the hours went by as I began to prepare for Veden, to make myself once more into a dim glimmering of the Fleet officer I had once been. The hours *snicked* by me:

Exercising. Running in the Fleet park, the Philippine forest hugging close to the pacing trails, animal calls punctuating my puffing silences. The Slots had thickened my waist, softened my arms, blurred my physical awareness.

Updating. I was behind on Fleet policy, Fleet strategy, even tactical modifications. The Fleetwide Firetongue Stet had been changed, because of fears that the Quarn had captured one. So the Stet in my apartment was useless now. I resolved to keep it, though.

Maneuvering, Tonji was surprised when I called in to accept— "I wondered if I would see you again, Sanjen," he said. I had to talk my way out of the usual attendance at Fleet ceremonials, the rewelcoming ritual, a reception. I had no desire to be pressed to the Fleet bosom.

Husbanding. I took walks with them in the dim corridors of the Slots where we still lived. Linger. Listen. Wander. Wait. I could feel them struggling against the fears, the gripping anxieties that I was free of that now. Angela and the children balked at the new apartment I found them. She hung back, was unable to leave the bedroom for two days. Even when she mustered the strength, her mouth sagged awry like a gate off its hinges. Chark and Romana spent endless slack hours in front of the 3D.

Fathering, yes. If there was guilt here it was in the fathering. The world defines a brace of years for childhood; of parenthood there is no riddance. If I seemed to chafe under these scratching facts, it arose from my own impatience, once my unconscious had allowed my decision to float up into reality: to be off, gone; to stride the skies once more. Call it callous—I did, repeatedly, and was as helpless to quell the guilt as a sunjammer is to slip free of the solar wind.

I had, of course, the refuge of duty; a comfortable harbor. I settled there, finally, reasonably untroubled. For what, really, could I do for them unless they recovered? I grew up in the leafy abodes of rural Philiipines, learned from a portable slate. Chark and Romana, denizens of apartment and hallway, had been learning that their future would be a succession of riveting sixty-minute episodes, loaded with healthful educational snippets, all of which would make them appear heroic, compassionate, dutiful to the greater aims of humanity, and attractive to the opposite sex. Perhaps, in the end, it would be better for them to

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believe that, than to stare into the abyss I knew.

Then living with Angela became easier. She had seen me cast off into high vacuum before as a convoy Captain; once convinced I was going, she rehearsed the litany she knew.

Oddly, matters improved.

We had had the sickness together for nearly a year; it invaded everything. In those times, at night she would lie, as often as not in a valley of damp sheets we made for ourselves by our own labors, her legs slack and obliging, a well to pump if anyone should wish. And I still did desire her, although I was well versed in this territory, a commuter where once I had been explorer.

Somehow, the balance shifted when I resolved to go. After that, we no longer went to bed like dutiful laborers in a factory, bound to go and sweat. Instead we spent long hours, arguing first with diminishing fervor and, later, discovering a last saving grace note on the now-dim chord of marriage. I rediscovered old rhythms in her. Her surface was once again an intimate sweaty field of calluses, pores, a geography of wife with aged favorite hollows and valleys and moles, all places worn smooth by my eyes. There, and *ah*: her thin black eyebrows would arch high and hang there, skin slick and electric.

At times in our arguments she would simply repeat my name, head hanging, in a soft despair, a mutual funk, *Ling, Ling, Ling* and afterward, during our all-encompassing battering, a pocket of my mind would trip out a play on the the name, chimes in the night, Ling equals lingam. Though there was some verse to it, these times were still only spaces in a continuum, a zest for the known; Angela was still wife. (The word, the word—Anglo-Saxon, *wif*, "woman". I wondered how different the Mongul culture would be had not English already become the effective world language before the Riot War. Thoughts of Old Nippon and the Mainland were couched in terms familiar to Shakespeare. A known language, a known wife, comforting. But that wasn't enough.)

I saw Tonji once more. He had been chosen to deal with my reentry, since—in the logic of Fleet—he'd known my 'difficulties' in the past and would be able to assess my recovery. Even granted that, I saw no reason why he should formally hand me my Commandant materials, the new Firetongue Stet, and deliver the customary lecture.

"I have little time," I said, cutting him off. "You can freeze-dry that pretty little speech."

Tonji grimaced. An underling handed him the Fleet outbound file on Veden and he gave it to me. "Ah . . . one last point."

"Yes?" I turned to go.

"Your primary task is to stabilize Veden. Socially, I mean. We must keep the Flinger system intact and functioning."

"Of course."

"And . . . the Veden system is singular. The orbital dynamics, I mean. There may be some difficulty on planetary approach."

"I accept risk."

"Yes." Tonji smiled broadly and saluted. I thought nothing of it.

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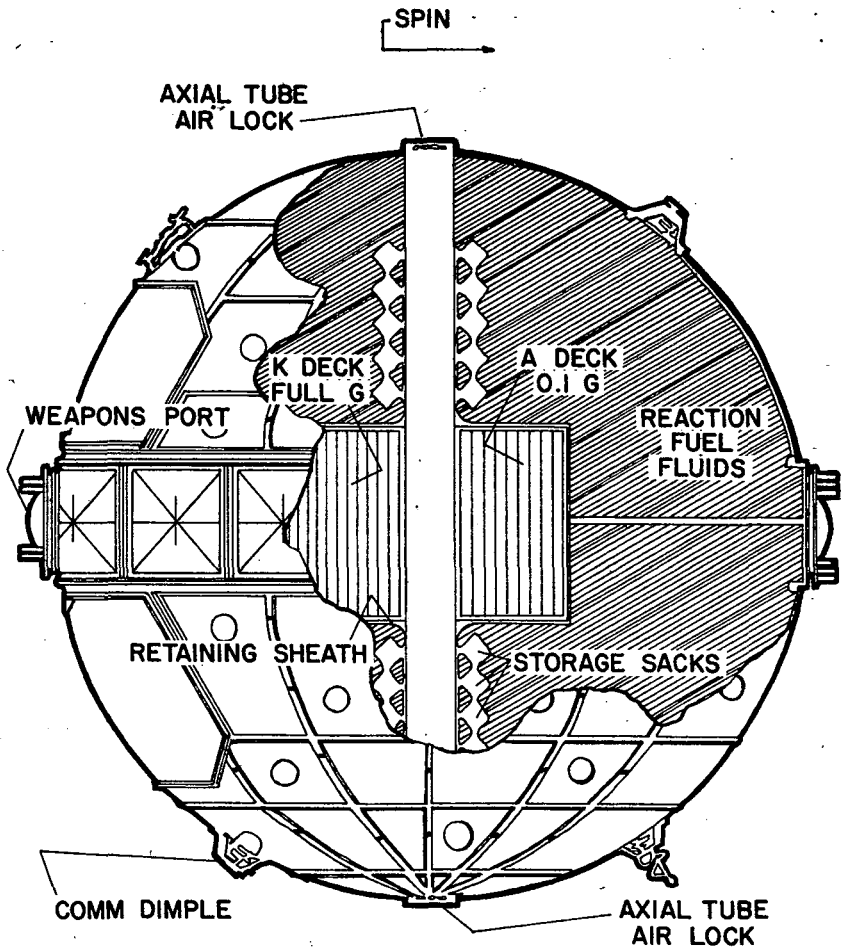

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4

I didn't get along well with the ship's officers on the long voyage out. The *Sasenbo* was a Prime Class vessel and I was dismayed to find it crewed by political appointees, leftovers, officers long on desk-savvy and short on discipline; or so they seemed to me. Most appeared motivated by a shrewd but stupid ambition; their primary concern seemed to be whether their socks matched.

And there was no Sabal game. None. Not any more.

After a few rude exchanges in the Officer's Mess I took to having meals in my room—as a passenger, I could by rights. So I studied dispatches, read research summaries on the Quarn, exercised, thought of Angela—an odd sensation, despite our kernel of differences; abstinence makes the heart grow fonder—and often walked the vast ship, studying her. I had seldom been on a Prime vessel.

They all look like beach balls from the outside, threaded by one thick axis. The skin is dimpled by comm pods, weapons ports, sensors and, at each end of the protruding axis, skimmer ports. None of this is visible from inside, of course. The axis *is* the ship. People and other delicate items live at the center of the beach ball, inside the axial tube. The beach ball is filled with colloidal fluid—fuel—which shields out Jump radiation and other undesirables. The beach ball skin is flexible organiform, to adjust for varying fuel loads, and ordinary cargo hangs at regular intervals from the axis, wrapped in sacks to separate it from the colloids.

You can see all this if you go to the full-G deck—the outside deck of the axial tube. The view is murky because of the reaction fluid. You're standing on a transparent floor, peering down—"out," really—at a swampy universe. Blades of light from the axis cut shafts through it. Bags of cargo hang down into the colloids, kept aligned by the centrifugal tug of rotation. You can't see the organiform skin. It's too far away—over two hundred meters. Anything you could see through would be pretty poor radiation shielding; you'd fry while playing tourist.

That's all the scenery there is. Life evolves—as far as we know—on the surfaces of conveniently spherical planets, so if you look up, you look out. But in deep space "gravity" has to come from rotation, so the canonical geometry is the cylinder. Life creeps on at its petty pace inside the spinning cylinder, and overhead lies not infinity and/or salvation, but the null-g point, the axis. *Sasenbo*'s axis was eye, ear, nose, throat, alimentary canal and—most important—spine. The decks, A through K, were concentric cylinders rotating about the spine: bridge at A, excess storage at K. My cabin was on C. I exercised often in the axial gym, rebounding off rubbery walls in elaborate bank shots. I was there when the *Sasenbo* Captain summoned me.

He was in his couch on the bridge deck, conferring with a dutiful crescent of lieutenants. One of them gave me a sour look as I approached and they dispersed. The Captain said, "Oh yes," distracted, and thumbed a fresh readout. "We

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were programming your drop."

"I assume you can put me into a planetary ellipse?"

He looked up, blinked with surprise. "No. Oh no. You know that."

"Why not?"

"Why, we aren't planning an intersection with Veden's orbit at all. You have to go through the Flinger."

"*What?*"

"Fleet informed you of this difficulty."

"They sure as hell did not."

"It's here—in your briefing manifest." He waved at the readout. "General Tonji himself, I see."

"He didn't mention it."

The Captain frowned. "Odd. Well—" he shrugged—"it's not my affair."

"It's impossible for a one-man craft to go through the Flinger."

"No it isn't. Merely difficult. A precise maneuver."

"Why can't you drop me near Veden?"

"The gravitational potentials are too extreme, too variable. Probability of Jump failure—not just for you, for *us*, the parent ship—is unacceptable."

"What's the uncertainty in my injection velocity?"

He consulted his readout. "Thirteen kilometers per second."

"Impossible!"

He smiled mirthlessly. "Unavoidable. The potentials—"

"If I miss, the neutron star gets me."

He nodded judiciously. "I would say. Certainly that's the most probable outcome."

"Such a maneuver is *not* Fleet policy."

"Correction: *was* not."

"*Is* not. I—"

"Our error rate is high." He waved a hand at the long tube that was the bridge. "Fleet adopted new measures several months ago."

"I could get killed." At the ceremony Tonji had smiled broadly.

"So could we all, if we tried for Veden itself. I imagine that's why so many officers turned down this particular assignment."

"Others?"

"Before you, I mean. Quite a few."

I stood, breathing deeply for a long moment. "All line officers, I imagine."

"Ummm. Yes." He was already pondering another display. "Too dangerous for them, I take it. Veden's the special case, you see—nothing else in the Empire to match it for navigation mishaps. Before, with reliable Jump scanners, it wasn't so hard. But now—"

"Uh huh," I said.

5

Waltz of the billiard balls, I thought muzzily. The stars were big ones and I was a dwarf. *Sasenbo* was the cue, tapping me gently away. A classy richochet off Jagen, using gravity's soft brush. A bank shot. Once free, I'd surge out from the two stars, back to the life of straight lines and cozy causalities. *Snick*—we're racing for the Veden pocket. It yawns. I drop *pock* into Newton's well.

A good dream, yes.

I floated up out of it.

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Three days, now, since I climbed in my pod and drifted up through *Sasenbo*'s hollow axis. Past pale white skimmer craft in their berths, past storage bins and capped ports, past the storage sacks that hung outward from the axis, teardrop shaped, head down into the vast sphere of fuel fluid. Out, through the gaping jaws of the aft lock. Clamshell doors opened. Magnetic fingers plucked me forth, unhusking me, cupped a pocket of fields around me. *Ting*—and the Jump flux rippled, expelling. Stars leaped into being. I took sightings, weighed vectors and momenta, nudged the pod this way and that.

And dreamed. There was nothing else to do. By meditation I dropped my oxy consumption to allow some reserve at the other end of my carrom. But sleep stretched thin. I came drifting up, sandy-eyed, thirsty, lifting thumb-fingered my suit helmet shield—

Violet cut my eyes. I squeezed them shut. Polarizers buzzed.

After a time I found it. Not through the port—that I togged shut—but on my screens. Lekki blotted out half of space, dark whirlpools churning her. Streamers gouged into naked blackness. Say *F2 star* and it means nothing; stare at Lekki and tremble. Jagen made her more fierce, but the deep violet of her light still jabbed at my eyes, even over the screens.

I felt a tug, now. A fleck of dust slowly coasted forward, past my hand, and pinned itself to a console key. Tides. Jagen.

There: a dot appeared at Lekki's rim and crawled across. The image warped. Detail of a vortex behind it flickered and faded as the dot moved.

Jagen, the Black Dwarf. Neutron Being. Key to the Flinger. Nine klicks in diameter, massing a scratch below Sol, old and cold now. A supernova birthed it, probably, sending Lekki off the main sequence for a bit, but somehow not erasing the biosphere of Veden. Now Jagen whirled about Lekki, fast, incredibly fast—a thousandth of light speed, my Doppler stuttered. A vast source of momentum.

Fuzzy light haloed Jagen as it vanished around Lekki. Of course—the gravitational potential at the neutron star's surface refracted light from Lekki, scrambling detail. A lens made from gravity.

Refracting light yes; soon, refracting me. I fell.

It was a simple process, really. Mr. Newton wouldn't have furrowed a brow over the Flinger; he spent only an evening, over port and snuff, on Leibnitz's mathematical challenges to the learned of Europe, and solved those without recourse to his methods of fluxions. An evening's entertainment, a mere warming of the frontal lobes after a day at the Royal Mint.

Ah, Newton, be with me now: my pod fell obliquely toward the Lekki-Jagen system, intersecting the Jagen orbit smack-on, diving at the neutron star as it rushed toward me.

I was to pass close to Jagen, on the face away from Lekki, dipping deep into Jagen's steep gravity well. With a nimble balancing of velocities, I'd weave through the Neutron Being's brutal pull, coyly allowing myself to be nearly captured, looping around Jagen, then breaking

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free. Escaping, I'd be on the side of Jagen facing Lekki. A turnabout.

But by then Jagen would've stolen my speed, braking me from the Sasenbo's relative velocity down to a pedestrian planetary clip. In a sense, my aim was to undergo an elastic collision with the neutron star's gravitational field. It was like bouncing a ball off the rear fender of an express train. The ball came off with less velocity than it had before. The train—ergo, Jagen—gained a little.

So went the arm-waving, the theory. But *Sasenbo* had spat me out with 3.64 km/sec error in insertion velocity. I fought. I trimmed, vectored, scrabbled sidewise, deformed my smooth hyperbolas into squiggly new curves.

My fuel burned away to nothing.

Falling. Checking. Falling. And here it came—

Jagen, a dark fleck. Its fields stretched my pod, sucked at my feet. Blood rushed from my head. I felt floaty, thick-tongued, magical. The Black Dawrf reflected precious little light and shone a naked red, ancient, long shorn of its megaGauss magnetic fields. My own fields surged and built, batting away the sleeting protons which tried to riddle me.

We wrapped around. *Ping, click* said my cabin. Something howled in the walls. Lekki loomed large. Below, huge rippling waves of plasma roiled and tossed, all at the beck of the little giant. Magnetic fields fought gravity.

I groaned—or was it the pod that spoke? Flecks darted at my edge of vision, my ears popped, confusion swam—. Jagen plucked with mas-

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sive fingers at my sleeve, coaxing me down to her slick surface, where surely the crunch of electrons overcoming their own Fermi pressure and collapsing in onto protons, wedding to birth neutrons—that crunch must ache, split the head, yea, neutrons pressing, pressing at a thousand million million grams per cc, sucking me through to stretch thin and spatter its skin and fry into gammas and x-rays, *ah*—

But no.

The hand eased. Fingers slipped, caught, slipped again. And were gone. We backed away from the Black Dwarf. I sucked in cooling air. My hands, aching from hovering over the consoles, floated before the wrinkling screens. It was a forgiving universe. Even my own sweat smelled good. Nice try, Mr. Tonji, but no bronzer.

★ ★ ★

Ofkaipan.

On the long swooping ride out to Veden, my alcohol store squandered in a grand celebration, I had ample time to mull over the word. It leaped to the frontal lobes, always ready. My parents had taught me what it meant, and then life had ground it in—

Better not go into that restaurant. *You know*—embarrassed nudge of elbow. You quickly walk on.

Shake hands at a reception, feel their slight cold withdrawal. The formal face smiles but the eyes, the eyes, they glitter. Tonji.

Deliveries to your home are slow, poorly packaged. Insolent servants of your superior officers cast you a look, give you the quick up and down—*does he wear shoes?*—and smile, ever so slightly. They make a face behind your back; you catch it in a mirror.

In a shop: *Perhaps we can find something more suitable in here*—They lead you to a rack of marked-down merchandise, scruffy, out of fashion.

With: I'm sorry, the Commandant is out. We don't kow when to expect him back.

And: You realize, of course, there may be a delay in taking care of this matter. This office is very busy.

Stares in crowds. Best not to go down that street.

A look of *Why did he come here? It was a general invitation, of course, but everybody knows*—

It doesn't happen all the time. Just enough to keep you off balance. You never know when it's a natural mistake. That's the worst of it: never knowing for sure.

★ ★ ★

So I took it out, that old pain, and rubbed it some. The old scabs came off and pus oozed out—so it wasn't healed, after all; were you surprised?—and then blood, and flaky dead skin pulled away so I could see it clearly again. Old pains are the best. They age well, like wine. It looked as though I had a good crop.

Some time passed.

And so I put it back in its corner, and tried to forget for a while. Veden would be different. And enjoyed the long arc up and out.

TO BE CONTINUED

★ ★ ★

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PAT
MURPHY

EYES OF THE WOLF

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She knew who here enemies were—but she wondered every now and then who *she* was.

THIS STORY must begin in the middle, because Rachel cannot remember the beginning. She does not want to remember the beginning.

In the middle, which will serve as the beginning, Rachel was a grey bitch wolf wearing a collar that carried a radio transmitter. She was chasing a rabbit across a meadow high in the Sierra Nevada.

The rabbit was two jumps ahead. It zigzagged around a clump of lupine. Rachel leapt the obstacle and gained ground. Her body was a grey streak, skimming above the ground, ears laid back, tail flying straight behind like a banner in a gale. The wind that fanned her face smelled of dust and terrified rabbit. A whine vibrated in her throat, broken by gasps of breath.

The rabbit twisted in mid-leap, abruptly changing course to dart toward a patch of bracken ferns. Rachel twisted to follow, but the rabbit shot ahead—two jumps, three jumps away. The scent of newly dug earth mingled with the scent of rabbit. And there was another scent—a musky, canine smell mixed with the odor of old blood.

A grey streak burst from the ferns. The rabbit dodged, leaping for safety in a freshly dug hole beneath a drooping fern. The grey streak intercepted; the rabbit squealed once—a scream of pain and desperation.

Rachel swerved to avoid colliding with the grey body that blocked her path. Nearly falling, she stopped in a scramble of dust. She shook herself, then stared into the bright eyes of the stranger who had stolen her prey, the bright eyes of Death. Death was a bitch with a grizzled coat and a muzzle stained dark with the blood of the rabbit.

The strange wolf dropped the dead rabbit and stood over it, staring back at Rachel. She stood taller than Rachel—big boned, broad shouldered. But her coat was frosted with white and Rachel knew that under the stain of blood, her muzzle was touched with white. The elements had weathered this wolf as they had weathered the granite peaks that surrounded the meadow, wearing away the cover to reveal the underlying structure. Age had stripped away the wolf's muscle, thinned her fur, and revealed the outline of the bones beneath. One ear was ragged, ripped in a long-ago fight. The other ear was laid back against the animal's head, so that the bright eyes seemed to glare from an earless head, a canine skull.

Somewhere in the forest that surrounded the meadow, a jay screeched—just once—then fell si-

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lent as if admonished by an older and wiser entity that this scene should be silent. Silent and scented with dust and hot blood.

Rachel eyed the dead rabbit that lay at the old wolf's feet. That should have been her kill. The old wolf had taken it from her. The smell of fresh blood burned in her nostrils, but Rachel moved slowly, circling the old wolf cautiously. When the old wolf pivoted to follow, she betrayed a weakness. She favored one front paw. From the look of it, the paw had been injured recently, and the wound had broken open when the wolf leaped after the rabbit.

Rachel glared at the old wolf. Her enemy was wounded—she could reclaim her kill. The old wolf stared back. Rachel tensed, ready to attack.

Wait. A memory darted across her mind. She recognized the old wolf's eyes from the world of the beginning. She remembered.

* * *

Eyes like granite pebbles set in a human face. Eyes like the eyes of a Sierra peak if a mountain had eyes. Hard. Flinty. Unyielding. Eyes that said: "You can't move me."

The face was a woman's, but it would have looked better on a man. Time had touched the woman's hair with grey, but it had not tamed the fierce eyebrows nor smoothed the rocky crag of a nose, the jagged cliff of a chin. If those eyes could cry, a network of wrinkles would conduct the tears away, a great river system of tiny grooves and deep ravines.

But those eyes could not cry. You cannot squeeze water from a stone. The eyes blazed from that mountain of a face, saying: "I know who you are. I know what you are. You are a fool and a coward. You've come this far, now do what you came to do."

* * *

A whimper escaped Rachel's throat and she fought the panic that made her legs tremble with the need to run. Involuntarily, she took a step backward and turned her head away from the ancient eyes that had triggered the memory.

The old wolf growled, asserting her dominance, and Rachel cringed, remembering the look in the eyes of the old woman. She had to obey the command in the eyes of the woman. She must do what she came to do. But what had she come to do?

She looked up when she heard the old wolf pick up the rabbit and stalk away. The wolf limped. Each time the wounded paw touched the ground, it left a spot of blood. Blood welled from a score of fine parallel gashes that started just below the knee joint and extended down the leg and across the top and pads of the paw. Rachel stared at the wound, and a memory flickered in her mind.

A picture: the steel jaws of a device designed to mangle an animal's leg without capturing the animal.

A series of pictures joined the first one. A shadowy human figure set the trap. A grizzled wolf trotted into the jaws of the trap, then limped away. The human figure returned with another human. The two followed the wounded wolf,

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and overtook her. One human pointed a rifle at the wolf; there was a flash of fire, and the wolf lay dead.

Fleeting memories of words accompanied the pictures and slowly, Rachel pieced the two together. Poachers. The trapper was a woodsman who guided city sportsmen to an assured kill. The trap made tracking and pursuit easy.

A sense of urgency nagged at Rachel and she whimpered in confusion. The air stank of blood, and in her mind, the last scene repeated: the flash of fire and the dying wolf. First, the dying wolf was a grizzled bitch. Then the picture flickered, and the dead animal was a young grey wolf wearing a collar that carried a radio transmitter. Rachel shook her head to clear it, and the collar shifted in the fur of the neck.

The old wolf had settled in the shade of an ancient bracken fern to tear at the flesh of the rabbit. At Rachel's movement, she looked up to growl and met Rachel's eyes.

A flicker, a change in the light, a shift in the impulses of the mind, and Rachel stared into the eyes of the old woman. No, not the eyes, the reflection of the eyes glimpsed in the shiny steel jaw of a trap. The eyebrows were fierce, and the voice boomed like the rumble of boulders at the start of a rock slide. "You ask me why I keep this thing here. Simple. Know your enemies." The hand that grasped the trap gestured with it and the reflection of the eyes shifted. The old woman was talking to a young man, a red head, and her voice seemed to carry a meaning beyond that conveyed by the words. "I keep it around to remind

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me of who my enemies are."

Rachel shivered and the memory faded. But the words seemed to echo in her mind: "Know your enemies." It was a command from the old woman, and Rachel had to follow it. She would backtrack along the old wolf's trail, meet the enemy, then wait for another memory to guide her.

The old wolf was ripping scraps of meat free from the bloody mess that had once been the body of the rabbit. Rachel ignored her. She circled the patch of bracken ferns, found the old wolf's trail, and followed it to the pine forest that surrounded the meadow. The trail was easy to follow—it was marked with the scent of dried blood. Rachel trotted through the grass with her head held high to sample the wind, and still had no fear of losing the track.

The shade of the forest held no colors. The trees were black; the spots of sunlight that filtered through the trees touched the forest floor with brilliant white. The jay mocking her from the branch of a pine was a soft shade of grey. She paused in the shade, disturbed by the lack of color, and blinked back into the sunlight meadow. The entire world was black and white—the sky was light grey; the mountains were the shade of weathered bone; the grass was black.

Rachel realized that the trouble was not in the world, but in herself. Her eyes were not equipped to see color—but she recalled what color was. She knew that the grass should be green and the sky should be blue. She knew the colors, yet her eyes did not see them.

She blinked again, and the disturbing memory of colors slipped away. She trotted through a black and white world and it was the only world she knew. The litter of pine needles was soft beneath her feet. The wind carried intriguing odors—the musty fragrance of deer droppings, the reek of a marmot den, the sour scent of lupine blossoms. She was glad to be travelling in a familiar world, following the old woman's orders.

She climbed out of the forest onto a dry ridge where the wind had scrubbed the dry earth clean. A miniature forest of scrub oak and manzanita clung to the side of the ridge. Rachel followed the old wolf's track through the brush along a trail blazed by rabbits and deer. At the foot of the ridge, a mountain stream that had been burned almost dry during the summer chuckled to itself in anticipation of the coming winter rains. In the tall grass that grew on the stream bank, Rachel found a spot where a gaunt grey body had rested, a hollow crushed in the grass and spotted with blood.

The track was fainter on the other side of the hollow—the scent had been washed by more than one morning's dew. But the smell of blood was strong—the old wolf had walked this when her wound was fresh.

The wind shifted, blowing from the direction from which the old wolf had come. The acrid scent of burnt tobacco tickled Rachel's nose, and she froze in place, caught by a memory of the world of the beginning.

* * *

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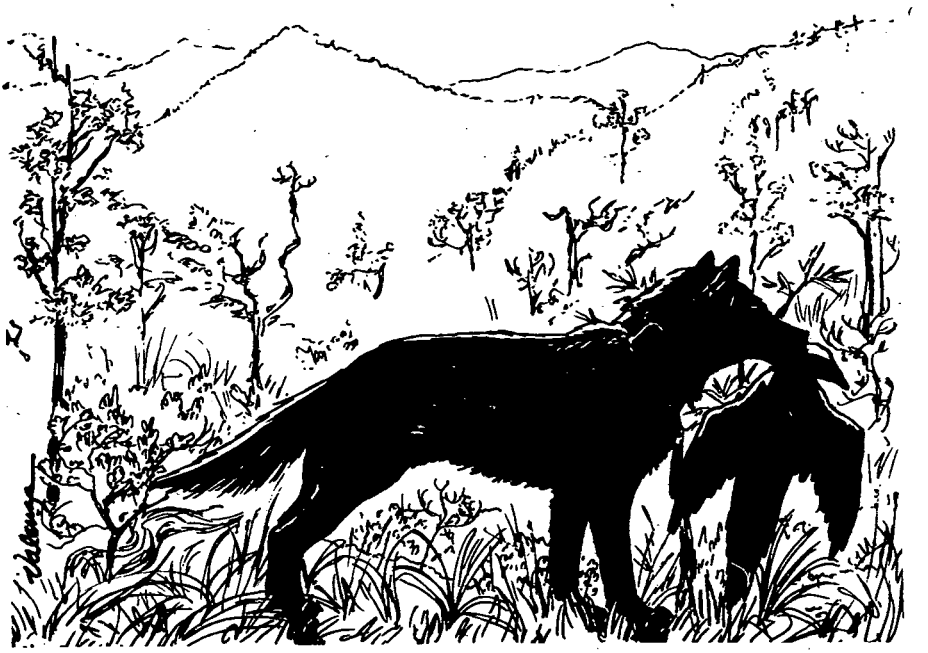

A laboratory. She lay strapped to a table in a laboratory that reeked of disinfectant and tobacco smoke. A red headed man—what was his name, she could not remember his name—leaned over her and peered into her eyes. He was smoking a pipe. She wanted to complain that the smoke bothered her, but she could not speak. He moved his head out of her field of vision, and she felt the cold touch of a needle against her arm. It did not hurt when the needle slipped under the skin—nothing could hurt her.

She tried to ask the red head "How long have I been here?" But she could not move her lips. She could not make a sound. The wolf that lay in the cage beside her whimpered.

She could not turn her head to look, yet she knew there was a cage beside her, she knew the cage held a grey female wolf, she knew the wolf wore a helmet designed to hold thousands of electrodes against the animal's skull just as she wore a helmet that held electrodes against her skull. And she knew that the wolf wore a collar that carried a radio transmitter.

Rachel felt the man pull the needle from her skin and heard his footsteps moving away. She tried to call after him, "Wait. Explain. Tell me why I'm here." She could not speak. The wolf in the cage beside her growled.

* * *

Rachel blinked and the memories darted away like minnows in a forest pool. But the sense of urgency that the memory had car-

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ried with it remained. She had been very close to the beginning. She knew who she was—a woman in the body of a wolf. But she did not know why.

The scent of tobacco had been mellowed by at least a day of wind and dew, but Rachel advanced along the old wolf's trail cautiously. In a clearing, she found the spot where the man-stench blended with the smell of blood. In the center of a patch of crushed grass, the old wolf had been caught and had struggled free. Rachel sniffed the grass, then sneezed to clear her nose of the foul smell. A man had knelt here less than a day before. He had sat in the grass and leaned against a tree while he smoked a cigarette.

On the other side of the clearing, Rachel found the faint trail left by the old wolf before she was caught. She cast about in the brush at the edge of the clearing, until she found the spot where the man had entered the clearing and left again. The man smell was strong, drowning out the scent of broken bushes and trampled grass. He had passed this way to set the trap, then returned to check it. He would be back, Rachel was sure of that.

She stood on the edge of the clearing, waiting for a memory to touch her and tell her what to do next. But the wind carried the scent of quail and her stomach reminded her of the rabbit that had been snatched from under her nose. She cocked her ears and listened to the whispers in the brush.

There! The peep of a young bird and the reassuring cry of its mother. Rachel stalked silently toward the sound, keeping her nose in the wind. She paused by a manzanita bush and peered through its brittle branches. A mother quail and her chicks scratched and pecked at the dry grass in a sunny clearing. One chick strayed away from her mother, hopping toward the manzanita bush. The mother bird clucked to the chick, then started to follow it.

Two leaps carried Rachel to the mother quail and a single bite snapped the birds neck. The chicks scattered like leaves before a gale, and Rachel let them run. The body of the quail dangled from her jaws, and Rachel tasted blood through the feathers. She stood in a sunny clearing in the Sierras and remembered the taste of a rare steak.

* * *

The restaurant smelled of coffee and tobacco smoke. The red-headed man across the table talked around the pipe in his mouth. Jacob—that was his name—she could never tell him that she had briefly forgotten his name or he would give her the look that said: "Old woman, you are getting senile."

"I talked to Jefferson, the researcher who did the transfer to a chimp," Jacob said. "He said it was of only marginal utility."

She did not speak; she calmly sliced another bite of steak and let the young man talk. She could hear the tension building in his voice. He talked a little faster than usual. A casual observer would not have noticed the change, but Rachel had made a study of this young man in the three piece suit.

She made him nervous. Rachel

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made many people nervous, but she made Jacob more nervous than most. He wanted her respect—but he also wanted to take over her lab.

"Imprinting a completely new pattern on a test animal takes much longer than emphasizing an existing pattern," Jacob continued. "And you won't be able to work during that time."

Still silent, she looked up from her plate and met his eyes. A lesser man would have flushed, suddenly uncomfortably aware that he was lecturing her with information that she had taught him. Jacob managed an affable chuckle, a laugh at himself—"Here I am telling you about the technique you had a hand in perfecting."

She recognized the flattery. She had not really helped perfect the technique; that was a job for neurophysiologists. She understood it, and she had been one of the first to use it when she had trained wolves for the army. It was not difficult to understand how it worked. Nerve cells, including the cells in the brain, transmit messages with weak electric currents. Any current generates an electric field. A field can be recorded and duplicated. And a duplicate of the field created by a current will generate a duplicate of the original current. By generating a specific field around an animal's brain and repeatedly stimulating a specific neurological pathway, she had caused that pathway, that thought, to become habitual in the test animal.

Researchers had used the same technique to imprint a personality on an animal's brain. A person's thought patterns, over a period of time, had to be recreated on an animal's brain. Thousands of pathways had to be stimulated.

Imprinting would be a tedious process. It would mean wasting at least a month of precious research time drugged and flat on her back. Two weeks to imprint her personality on the wolf; two weeks to absorb the memories and impressions that that personality had gained during its time in the wild. The technique was more than likely useless as far as learning about the behavior of wild canines, or learning anything of use to the army training program. Yet she was determined to go through with it. She had even chosen the wolf she would use—the same grey bitch she had trained for field tests for the army.

Jacob was still talking about the researcher who had imprinted his personality on a chimp. "He said that he forgot important things and remembered trivial ones. He said 'You might remember this conversation, yet forget why you were there.'"

Jacob was right—a successful personality imprint did not necessarily mean a successful transfer of memories. But that did not matter. She knew that she would use her army connections to gain funding; she would stake her reputation as a scientist on an experiment that was bound to fail. And she would not admit why—not even to herself.

* * *

The smell of tobacco smoke faded, and Rachel stood in a sunny clearing with a dead quail in her jaws. Far away in the brush, she

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heard the peep of a quail chick, an orphan left to wander without direction. Rachel had some direction—she was to study the ways of the wolf. That was the reason the experiment had been funded, that was its stated purpose.

It was not the real purpose. That was not urgent; that would not nag and plague her. That was not linked to the ancient eyes of the wolf nor to the woman with the eyes of a mountain.

Rachel dropped the quail and lowered her head to nose it. The collar tugged at the fur on her neck and she remembered that Jacob had insisted on the collar and the radio transmitter. If she did not return to the spot where she had been released in three days, the transmitter would emit a continuous signal, and the lab crew would track her and recapture her.

She could remember that, but she could not remember why she had come. She quit trying, and tore at the quail, gulping meat and skin and feathers.

The sound of a snapping twig interrupted her. She tested the wind. The man had returned with a companion and a dog. She abandoned the remains of the quail and stalked toward the men. She followed them, close enough to hear their conversation, yet far enough behind so the dog would not hear her.

She could not understand all the sounds the men made. But they skimmed the surface of her mind and triggered pictures, or feelings, or thoughts.

"I thought you said it was only a couple of miles," one man complained.

"The dog should be picking up the trail real close to here," the other man said.

"Sure seems like more than just a few miles." The man forced a chuckle. "All these bushes sure slow a man down."

"Sure, Mr. Dryer."

The dog picked up the trail and began a hoarse, anxious whining as he tugged at the leash. "He's on the trail," the trapper's voice remarked with satisfaction. "See. There's a print."

"Damn, that's a big one."

"I told you he was big." The dog whimpered, choking himself against the collar, and the men stopped talking. They pushed their way through the brush and Rachel paced beside them, listening to the whining of the dog and the puffing of the men. They travelled slowly. It was late afternoon, and they would not reach the meadow that day.

Restlessness prodded Rachel, and she broke into a trot, passing the men downwind. She moved quickly, tirelessly, using travel as a substitute for thought because she did not know what to think. These men had triggered no memories in her. They were not part of the reason she was here. She was confused. She had come close to remembering the beginning of the tale, but she had failed.

The sun was setting when she reached the meadow. The old wolf was easy to find. She lay where Rachel had left her—in the same spot, in almost the same position. When Rachel approached, the old wolf lifted her head to stare at her. Almost against her will, Rachel

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stared back, meeting the ancient eyes, hoping to jar a memory that would tell her the beginning of the tale. The old wolf growled, and Rachel continued to stare. What was it about the eyes?

The old wolf lunged—a low leap powered by a single thrust of the animal's hind legs. With the full force of the lunge, she crashed into Rachel's shoulder, bowling her over. Before Rachel could regain her feet, the old wolf leaped away, and stood ready to renew the attack.

Rachel remained on the ground. She bared her neck to the old wolf's fangs and flattened her ears in a gesture of appeasement. Her body knew the gestures. She had felt uneasy every time she stared into the old wolf's eyes because her body remembered, even if her mind forgot, that a direct stare was a direct challenge to the old wolf's dominance. Rachel rolled to her stomach and glanced cautiously at the old wolf. Blood stained the fur of the wounded leg; the gashes had broken open when the wolf had leaped at her.

The wind had died with the coming of dusk. The air was oppressively warm and still, like the air in a room that has not been opened for years. The smell of blood hung over the bracken patch. Rachel could hear the droning of a fly, buzzing in lazy circles over the carcass of the rabbit.

Rachel did not remember the past. She did not want to remember the past. She listened to the fly sing the praises of dead rabbits and maggots, and she projected scenes from one possible future.

Scene one—two men stood in a meadow, their pants wet to the knees from trudging through the grass that was wet with morning dew. The fat man held a rifle, the thin man held the leash of an anxious dog. A grizzled bitch wolf stood at bay in a patch of bracken ferns. The fat man raised the gun. A flash of fire, and a dead wolf lay in the grass. Later, a fly buzzed over the carcass of a bitch wolf, stripped of its grizzled fur.

Scene two—a courtroom. The air was hot and still and scented with dust. Rachel stood in a witness stand and pointed at two shadowy figures. A fat man with a rifle. A thin man who held a shiny steel trap. Rachel knew them—Mr. Dryer and the trapper. She would see them fined and imprisoned for killing a protected predator.

Rachel heard the voice of the old woman with the granite visage rumble through the courtroom. She was saying something about her enemies, know your enemies. Rachel would know her enemies. She would memorize their faces when they killed the old wolf.

From where she lay, Rachel watched the old wolf limp back to her resting place. She deserved a better death. She did not deserve to die at all. But few got what they deserved.

Rachel watched the old wolf lick the bloody leg—cleaning out the gashes, then cleaning them out again. The last light of the sunset faded, and the moon rose. A full moon—its light gleamed on the wet fur of the injured paw. It did no good to lick the wound, yet the old wolf licked it again and again. There was nothing to be done, so

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she did the only thing she knew.

Rachel could feel a memory stirring, rising to the surface of her mind. She could smell a memory over the reek of the rabbit's blood, and she did not like the scent. The old wolf looked up and met Rachel's eyes, but Rachel glanced away. She stretched to her feet, and her legs felt stiff and tired. She turned away from the old wolf and stalked out of the bracken patch, away from the smell of blood and death.

Bats flew over the meadow, dipping and fluttering in pursuit of night insects. As elusive as memories. Rachel raised her head to watch them, and met the eyes of the pock-marked old woman who lived in the moon. Before she could look away, she remembered.

* * *

The eyes were gray granite pebbles in a granite face. The woman with the eyes of a mountain. She stared at Rachel intently, as if puzzled by what she saw. The fierce eyebrows formed question marks.

A pane of glass separated Rachel from the old woman. A window, Rachel thought, leaning forward to peer out past the old woman. And the old woman leaned forward to block the view.

Not a window, Rachel realized. A mirror. The granite eyes were her own.

The room smelled of medicines and disinfectant. Rachel sat before a dressing table mirror. Her legs ached with a steady persistent pain—as if they had always hurt and they always would hurt. Her eyes felt gritty and tired, but she knew from experience that sleep would not refresh them. They were tired of opening each morning to face the world, and only the final sleep would end their pain. Her body was wearing out, and she had to live with the slow decay.

She knew why she had fought for grant money with all her reputation, why she had insisted on being the one to transfer, why she had claimed a new understanding essential to the training of wolves could be gained from an uncontrolled experiment. She had wanted to run again. She had wanted to see the world clearly, not thorugh the fogs of age.

The eyes in the mirror, her own grey eyes, blazed with anger and despair.

* * *

The pock-marked face of the old woman who lived in the moon glared down at the young wolf. The wolf tilted her head back to shout defiance at the bitch in the moon and her cry rose with a wail and ended with a sob that sounded almost human. Lonely, lonely, alone—the wail echoed across the meadow and vibrated among the granite peaks. The echoes died—and across the meadow, another voice cried to the moon. And somewhere in the jountains, a chorus of demons answered the cry The wolves that hid in the weathered granite peaks were cursing the moon's pale face.

Rachel was young, but her body was dying. And she was condemned to watch an aged sister die from the shot of a poacher's gun. She tilted her head and the moonlight filled

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her throat and she howled to the moon and waited for the dawn.

* * *

The sky began to cry just before dawn, a steady drizzle that drove Rachel to take cover in the pine forest. The men arrived long after dawn. The dog pulled the guide forward and the guide cursed the dog. The fat man lagged behind and cursed the guide for walking too fast. The guide slipped in the mud by a patch of lupine, and the dog pulled, and he fell to his knees. He got up cursing the rain, cursing the dog, cursing the day.

Rachel followed them, taking cover behind clumps of lupine and fern. The dog spotted the old wolf first and changed his panting for a desperate yelping. The old wolf did not stand to greet them. She lay motionless beneath a dripping fern. For a moment, Rachel thought that she might already be dead, then she raised her head to glare at the men and their yapping dog.

"There's your wolf," snarled the guide. "Shoot him and let's get on back."

The fat man looked at the wolf and then at the guide. "But he's just lying there." He licked his lips nervously. "Is it sporting to shoot a wolf that's just lying there?"

The guide laughed. "I got you a wolf—you want me to prop him on his feet for you too? Shoot him lying down—I don't care." The guide turned away to yank on the leash and drag the dog toward him. "Shut up you stupid hound."

The fat man looked at the wolf and reluctantly took one step closer. He stared at the wolf as he raised

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his rifle. The old wolf lunged, ready to fight the staring eyes that challenged her dominance.

The fat man shot wild, and the wolf was on him. The first rush knocked him down in the mud, and the wolf was at his throat. The guide could not shoot without hitting the man—he kicked at the wolf. Blood spurted from the fat man's throat and Rachel caught the scent of hot blood.

The guide shouted once when Rachel hit him from behind. He rolled, and for a moment, his hands caught her throat and gripped the collar. He held her away by gripping the thin metal strand. And the tug of the collar reminded her that she was human, she was not a wolf, she was an old woman doomed to die in bed.

She refused to die. She fought against Death and he screamed, a hoarse cry like a curse that never ended. She lunged. The safety catch on the collar snapped. She reached his throat and stopped the scream.

The meadow was quiet. The fat man lay still and the old wolf stood over the body. The hound had run away into the pine forest. Rachel nosed the body—it wasn't Death at all, just a thin man with a bitter face. The raindrops landed gently on his face and trickled down his cheeks, washing away the blood. He still clung to the band of metal that held the metal box of a radio transmitter.

The lab could not track her. They could find this meadow, but they could not find the grey female wolf, they could not return Rachel to the dying body she had abandoned. The old woman might hunt for Rachel, but she wouldn't find her. Rachel knew how the old woman's mind worked, she would know how to avoid her traps. In her mind, she heard an echo of the woman's bass rumble: Know your enemies.

The lab would be ruined and the old woman would retire. Jacob, the ambitious redhead, would be left to dominate the ruins, lord of nothing. Rachel grinned suddenly. Could it be that the old woman had planned that Rachel should escape? Had she really planned to return to that old body? Or had the old woman figured that by transferring her personality to a wolf she could ruin her successor while allowing her own personality to continue after her death? It was possible. Rachel would have to consider the possibility at length when she had the time to sort the old woman's thoughts from her own.

Rachel turned away from the bodies and touched noses with the old wolf for the first and last time. She glanced at the wolf's injured paw—it was not bleeding. When the wolf stalked away to her resting place, she limped, but the paw did not bleed. The old wolf would heal. She too would survive.

Rachel trotted across the meadow, heading for the high country. The rain would wash away her trail and she would lose herself in the weathered granite bones of the world. She did not look back.

And somewhere in the Sierras, a grey bitch wolf with uneasy memories chases rabbits and howls at the moon. She dreams sometimes of the beginning, remembering a granite faced woman with the eyes of a wolf. ★

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"COME FLY WITH ME—"

science fact:

A Step Farther Out

Jerry Pournelle, PhD

HOT DIGGITY DAWG! I am so excited I can hardly stay in my seat.

Which, when you come to think of it, is a pretty strange reaction to my having been to a scientific/engineering conference, namely the Third NASA Conference on Radiation Energy Conversion; or is it? Before I'm through with this column, I hope to have you jumping out of your chairs too.

The conference title doesn't tell much; but look at the session titles, and maybe it will begin to dawn: "Laser Energy Conversion; Space Solar Power; Radiation Enhanced Chemistry; Solar Pumped Lasers." No? Well, I admit that the bare titles didn't exactly turn me on, either. I did have to attend: so far as I know I published the first science fiction story in which spacecraft are launched by ground-based lasers ("High Justice", which is included in the book by the same name, available from Pocket Books if you haven't bought it yet) and one paper was to be on laser-powered spaceflight. If that wasn't enough, there were also papers on solar-power satellites, and given my interest in both energy and space they were impossible to pass up.

Those papers were excellent, and I'll tell you about them in due time; but the real kicker was presented by Kenneth Sun, a graduate student at the University of Washington, the paper itself co-authored with his professor, Dr. Abraham Hertzberg. It was called "Laser Aircraft Propulsion," and who'd have thought it would be the liveliest thing I've heard all year?

But it was. One of the problems with advocating space exploration is answering the question "Yes, but how can we make any *money* out of it? How can investments be paid off? Don't tell me about new knowledge and all that, or about pie-in-the-sky fifty years from now; what I want to know is, how can we *profit* in a reasonable time?"

And the answer to that one is hard to come up with. As I discussed in the column on space industries, we have a number of concepts

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that look good to make money: manufacture of exotic materials such as high-coercive-strength magnets, something easy to do in zero-gravity and very costly here on Earth; biochemical research; and of course space power beamed down to Earth—but every one of those is a "maybe" because of the unknown costs and unpredictable market for the products. (Energy will have a predictable market, but the cost of space power satellites is so huge compared to the same costs for kilowatts here on Earth that you need faith to invest in SPS.)

Come now Sun and Hertzberg to give an answer to that question.

We'll pay for space satellites by using them to power airplanes; and the savings will come in money we don't have to pay the Arabs for kerosene (otherwise known as jet fuel).

Sun and Hertzberg are quite serious—and their concept uses nothing but off-the-shelf technology. The airplane is a present-day machine; by a coincidence that hardly surprises you, the Seattle team studied a Boeing airplane. The aircraft is just barely modified: the regular engines and fuel tanks are left intact. The tail (vertical stabilizer) is twinned for reasons which will be obvious in a moment; otherwise the only modification is the addition of a new engine on top of the fuselage.

The engine looks like a regular turbofan jet engine, except that in the middle, where the combustion chamber would be if it ran on kerosene, they've placed a big box-like heat exchanger. The top of the heat exchanger is a laser target. Laser energy shines onto the target; heat goes into the system; air comes in from the front through a compressor, and is heated, just like in a regular jet engine, except that instead of getting the heat from burning kerosene it gets it from the heat exchanger—and lo, the airplane flies.

It takes off under normal kerosene power. It carries aboard enough fuel to go some 900 kilometers if it loses the laser power. It lands with its usual engines. True, there's a bit of drag from the additional engine up on top, but the reduced fuel load more than compensates. Understand, Sun and Hertzberg have made no attempt to optimize the system. They have taken an existing aircraft and (on paper—no working model yet) modified it. Everything is to be kept simple.

Kerosene at present sells for about $1.00 a gallon. It is hardly unrealistic to assume that within a few years the price will be $1.00 a liter, or about $4.00 a gallon. Thus the saving is significant, given what a jet plane consumes while flying.

The effect on the upper atmosphere is all to the good, too. There's no contrail from the exhaust. No exhaust. No water vapor to form clouds. No oxides of nitrogen. Nothing but hot air.

Fine. Where are they getting the laser power?

From a satellite. A very dumb satellite. The power plant is nothing but a vast grid, something like three kilometers by one kilometer, covered with presently-available solar cells operating at present efficiencies of such. At each end of the

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satellite is a very large CO_2 laser, with mirror for steering so that it can track the aircraft. The airplane has a small laser for "handshaking" communication with the satellite, thus aiding the satellite in tracking its target.

And that's the system. Everything, including the laser, is off-the-shelf. This being an unclassified conference there wasn't and couldn't be much discussion of the big military lasers we all know exist; but nobody seriously doubts that a laser of the proper power could be built.

The satellite is a grid of carbon-filament structure, nothing difficult to build. It can be rolled or folded up in segments and carried in the Shuttle. The grid, partly assembled on Earth, can be unrolled—if you've never seen some of the new carbon-filament stuff, you'd be amazed at how strong it can be and yet roll up like whalebone—once it's up to low earth orbit (LEO), after which it is covered with solar cells. The electricity generated by the cells is used to drive an ion engine—also off-the-shelf—which takes the satellite up to geosynchronous earth orbit (GEO).

And here's where the excitement comes in. At presently advertised prices per pound to LEO (Shuttle price) the whole project comes to less than a billion dollars. Possibly considerably less. Sun estimates about $650 million dollars. As the inventor of Pournelle's Law of Costs and Schedules ("Everything Takes Longer and Costs More") I have me doubts about that figure, but it's good ballpark range.

And—each satellite, powering only *two* aircraft per satellite, pays for itself in fuel savings alone in about thirty years.

Investment under a billion; payoff in less than thirty years; that's no longer a big government program. That's the kind of thing utilities are used to. True, utilities want more for their billion invested in a power plant than just to get the money back; they want profits; but—

It's at this point that entrepreneurial skil comes in. As G. Harry Stine says in his *Third Industrial Revolution,* somebody's going to get rich in space. There will be new billionaires as a result of space exploitation, just as there were created multi-millionaires from the aircraft industry, and from electronics. If a space project of this magnitude can pay for itself with an assured market—and it's inconceivable that the need for jet travel will decrease in coming years—then the profits can be left to "fallout" benefits. After all, anybody who thinks hard about the situation knows that once space operations become routine, there will be a number of profitable lines. The magnet manufacture, for example, is a certain winner if you've got a space station in orbit to begin with; the doubt is whether the magnets can pay for the cost of building the station.

And the same is true for other commercial concepts. No one of them is certain to pay for the costs of the system—and nobody wants to get into a number of disparate lines of business, each needed so that the total sum of their incomes will pay for the huge investment. Business doesn't work that way. But here we have a way to pay for the station,

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so that the fallout discoveries are pure profit.

And at the same time we advance technology, and reduce payments for foreign oil. If some private firm doesn't leap at this, you'd think the government would. If it appeals to you, write your Congressperson—I'm sure no one in Congress has heard of this scheme.

If all that wasn't enough, there was also Wayne Jones of Lockheed, whose paper was on laser energy relay units.

If you have your power source in LEO it goes into shadow, and you lose power. Not too good. If you put it up in GEO, your laser beam must be exceedingly tightly focussed or you're losing energy. Sun and Hertzberg know this, but they've eaten the extra cost to keep the system simple.

The Lockheed group, however, has studied another way. You put your energy source in GEO alright; but then you have several relay stations, which are nothing more than fancy steerable mirrors, in LEO. This reduces the total mass to orbit and cuts system costs. Relays give other options, too.

Remember my column on Jim Baen and his electric spaceships? Well, the concept is being looked at; but the laser people think that instead of beaming power for orbit-to-orbit transfer with microwaves, which take very large antennae, why not use lasers? Thus the Earth to GEO, or Earth to Moon ship, could be powered by a *big* solar-cell array which doesn't go anywhere, with the energy sent by laser.

It's all very practical. It can work, and by that I don't mean that someday we'll be able to make it work—I mean it can work with what we have right now. Either the Sun-Hertzberg "dumb" system or the more sophisticated relay system could be started right now, carried to orbit by Shuttle payloads, and got into operation a few years after the Shuttle begins routine flights. It could be that close.

And if by now I haven't got you excited, I've failed; because just writing about this makes me want to run out and shout at people. It can happen. Right now, in our lifetimes. And think of the fallout benefits:

—learning how to assemble large structures in space;

—orbit-to-orbit transfer capabilities;

—a space "construction shack".

There are a lot of others, of course. Scientific observations. As Phil Morrison told me last year, it's insane not to study the Sun; and the best way to do that is to get out there where you can see what's going on. But ignoring all those and just looking at the business opportunities, you can see mountains of payoffs.

Now what about the drawbacks? There are some, of course. First, you're dealing with gigaWatts. The University of Washington laser-powered aircraft uses a 10 gigaWatt laser power satellite. That's a lot of Watts to play with, and a big laser. What if it misses the airplane?

Well, it won't burn down Cleveland. It might start a fire, although the damage wouldn't be one ten-thousandth of the damage sustained by a crashing airplane. Matter of fact, because the aircraft are carry-

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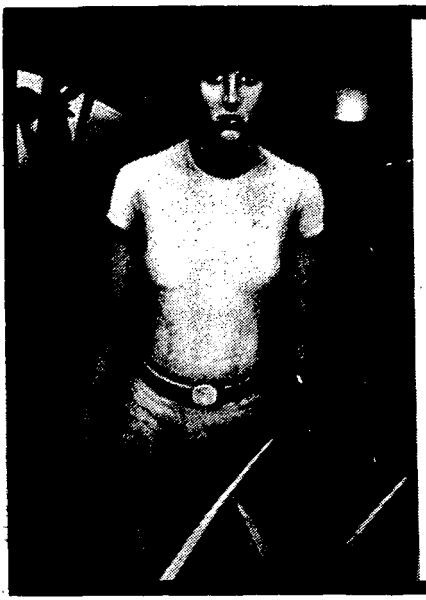

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ing so much less fuel on takeoff—and 92% of all aircraft accidents are within five minutes of takeoff or landing—if one *does* crash, the damage will be enormously less; and because of the reduced takeoff weight, the chances of accidents on takeoff are much reduced.

Then too, the frequency of the laser can be carefully selected so that the power will reach the airplane—it will not fly under laser power until it is at high cruising altitude—but can't reach the ground underneath. The atmosphere is pretty good at absorbing energy. Also, don't forget that the beam sweeps across the ground at something above the speed of the airplane, so that it's moving awfully fast.

But you do have a "sungun" in orbit, and in theory I suppose some madman could modify it to do considerable damage to the countryside below. Now by considerable damage I mean something comparable to an aircraft loaded with chemical bombs, understand. I don't even mean comparable to crashing a fully-loaded 747; or at least I don't think so. And if the beam is constructed to radiate in frequencies that won't hit the ground, it is no simple matter to modify that laser to another frequency. Certainly that wouldn't be done secretly by one crackpot. It would take the entire satellite crew, and some of the ground personnel as well, all in a conspiracy.

And come to that—it doesn't take all that great a conspiracy to burn down a city with gasoline. Adding the satellite hasn't given potential terrorists any capability they don't have now, although it does give

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them a theoretically more spectacular one. On the other hand, one suspects it would be harder to enlist the satellite crew in such a conspiracy than it would be to subvert, say, the night watchman at a dynamite factory.

Effects of adding that energy to the upper atmosphere? Unpredictable. But we already add it, along with exhaust gasses, when we fly a conventional jet plane, so it's unlikely the laser will do more harm, and there's a lot of good reason to believe it will do none at all.

So much, then, for laser-powered aircraft. They'll work, we can afford them—remember: *one* satellite controlling two and *only* two aircraft will pay for itself even at $1.00 a gallon kerosene, and the concurrent benefits are incalculable but great. I love the idea. I hope somebody with the wherewithal to finance them will too.

Now what of "my" laser-powered spacecraft? (I hasten to add that I did not invent the concept; the work was done at AVCO-Everett by A. N. Pirri and R. F. Weiss, working on a concept which seems first to have been studied by A. R. Kantrowitz; I had their paper in front of me when I wrote *High Justice.)*

They'll work. At least that's the latest thinking. True, I seem to have made a mistake: the color of the laser is likely to be ruby red, from a CO_2 laser, rather than blue-green as I have in my stories; and the launch site is likely to be a couple of thousand feet above sea level rather than down on the flat plains of Baja where I put it. Otherwise I seem to have got it pretty straight.

(There is not far from the Baja site I used for "my" launches a high plateau; purists may imagine that the launches happen there. Baja, with its tropic location and uninhabited areas to the east remains a good site.)

I've described the concept before, and won't go much into detail here. Basically, one takes a capsule massing in the order of a metric ton and beams a lot of laser power up its tail. The report I heard at this conference was on an on-board reaction mass concept—the capsule carries fuel, which is heated by the laser energy. In my stories I used a "ramjet" effect for the initial phases of flight, with the laser heating air until the atmosphere was thin, after which it switches over to on-board reaction mass. I asked if the ramjet concept was rejected for cause or simply unstudied, and was told that there's no theoretical reason it won't work, it just hasn't been looked into, at least not by the speakers, D. H. Douglas-Hamilton and D. S. Reilly of AVCO Everett Research Laboratory.

So that's one that's still alive, and note the possibilities: if the laser launching facility is constructed, the real costs to orbit have been absorbed. The flight article needn't be very expensive. Thus the prediction I sometimes make in my lectures: namely that within the lifetime of my student audiences a family can afford a space capsule which can be launched for them to live in, is still very much alive.

* * *

The conference produced a lot more. Some of the papers were on

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concepts that seem pretty far out even by *my* standard: how do you like windmills in space?

Imagine the following: a very large structure, looking like a Dutch windmill, but with blades hundreds of meters high. The solar wind—that stream of particles which constantly flows from the Sun, and which wasn't suspected until we had space probes—exerts enough pressure on the blades to turn the device. The "solar windmill" turns a generator, just as the Appropriate Technology Earthbound windmills do. Electricity is produced.

Sounds fantastic, doesn't it? And colorful, and quite pretty. Alas, it doesn't turn out to be very efficient. Note that I didn't say "impractical;" it would work, it just won't work as well as other devices would given the same investment. Still, I can see a time when solar windmills might be used as a quick and dirty power source kludged up by a spacefaring family; perhaps a TV "Spacetrain" (something like a futuristic "Wagontrain") series will make use of the idea.

There were other papers describing far-out stuff which does look to be useful.

One of the problems with space power stations is heat. Solar cells, and everything else for that matter, work on the principle of heat difference. The greater the difference in temperature between the front and the back sides of the solar cells, the more electricity they make.

Big lasers are not all that efficient, either, and must be cooled. On Earth that's a simple enough matter—run water through the system, and either let the water flow

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on downstream, or pass it through a cooling tower for evaporation; either way the heat is dumped, carried away from the system of interest. (Yes, I know: that waste heat can be a problem for those who have to live with it. True, sometimes the "waste heat" turns out to be a blessing, as it has been for the marine life off New England during the winters of '76 and '77; but it wants watching; indeed, the prospect for getting unwanted waste heat off Earth entirely ought to make conservation-minded become space enthusiasts.)

Out in space you certainly can't simply dump the heat by sending it "downstream," nor can you afford to use evaporative cooling. Evaporation would work, all right, and splendidly, but the major factor in any space system is the cost of transporting *anything* to orbit. You simply can't afford the transport costs of coolant.

Thus space structures must be cooled by radiation. In theory this is simple enough. After all, the night sky has an effective temperature wa-aa-y down there. In practice, though, it gets more difficult. It takes surface area to dump the waste heat, and surface area means mass and large structures; and those cost a bundle to put into orbit.

Comes now John Hedgepeth, President of Astro Research Corporation of Santa Barbara. He's a no-nonsense structures man who takes the attitude of "you design the concept, I'll get it built."

The problem of waste heat has to do with density of structures; if you can have them heavy you have no problem, but since in orbit you can't, you want to get the mass per area down low.

Table One shows some present-day figures. What's needed are structures with very large areas and very low weights: something in the order of 10 grams per square meter or better. That turns out to be possible, although it isn't easy.

Hedgepath presented another concept. Dust, it turns out, would be a marvelous radiating system. Dust has a *lot* of area for its weight.

Of course you can't throw dust away, just as you can't throw water away, not in space. The dust itself is valuable; any mass is. But suppose you take the dust and "throw" it across a couple of hundred meters or so; catch it, pass it through a heat exchanger to heat it up again, and throw the hot dust out to another catcher; and so forth. If you arrange the pitchers and catchers properly the net result of all this is that the dust cools things down, but there is no motion imparted to the total system.

And that makes a dramatic picture: a tetrahedron in space, kilometer or so high, with bright lines painted on the dark velvet. The lines are hot metallic powder (dust sounds better, doesn't it?) madly radiating the waste heat from another large structure a couple of kilometers long and half a kilometer-wide. From the big solar-cell array bright beams stab down toward Earth to power an airplane skimming along at 50,000 feet and moving at 700 miles an hour.

It's colorful—and it's also practical.

Frank Coneybear of Arthur D.

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TABLE ONE

Sizes and Masses

	Density	Size: projected area
Skylab	6,000 grams/meter^2	15 meters^2
Rockwell Solar Power Satellite	2,000 grams/meter^2	7,000 square meters
Halley Sailor	5 gm/m^2	800 meters^2
Echo Satellite	100 gm/m^2	20 square meters

Little presented his own summary of trends in power transmission through lasers and such. He led off by saying "You can judge my faith in technology by the fact that I have my viewgraphs but I don't have my necktie: my necktie is wherever United Airlines has sent my luggage, but I carried my viewgraphs with me." He went on to summarize what's happening in laser technology and conclude that microwaves can certainly beam power down to Earth from satellite altitudes, and the technology is wellnigh off-the shelf. However, lasers offer some big advantages, and the whole field of laser technology is exploding. There is the possibility of solar-pumped lasers, which will take sunlight (a *lot* of it, collected by a very large mirror) as their direct input.

The conference organizer, Ken Billman, is working on another direct use of sunlight: Nasa's SOLARES project, which is a system of orbiting mirrors. The large mirrors concentrate sunlight onto a particular area on Earth, extending daylight by several hours a day; the effect is to increase the growing season. There is also the possiblity of modifying climate through SOLARES.

And more, none of it science fiction. These are all concepts which we could start in on next year. They are understood far better than was space technology at the time John Kennedy set us the goal of the Moon in a decade. We could start work knowing that it's nearly certain that we'll get all our money back within 30 years, and that there's a very good chance we'll all get rich from fallout benefits.

After all, for the $50 billion a year we spend on importing oil, we ought to be able to buy any number of better systems.

Why don't we get started? ★

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THE FADED SUN: KESRITH

C.J. Cherryh

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"The *kel* of the Darks is a different *kel*," the *she'pan* had told him. But could even she have guided him had she known he would be the last *kel*?

For forty and more years a war has raged between humankind and the regul, the squat, slow-moving natives of remote Nurag . . .a strange war, for the regul themselves could not fight: instead, they hired the warrior-caste of the mri, a desert-dwelling species that claims Kesrith for homeworld. So long as regul preserved Kesrith inviolate from an alien intrusion, the treaty read, the Kel, the warriors of the mri, would serve the regul.

But the war was now lost, for the Kel had been hurled by regul commanders in suicidal attacks on humanity; and in the end of the war, Kesrith itself was ceded to humans. Regul society everywhere had been turned upside down by the conflict. . .and now Kesrith's former regul governors have been stripped of command and sent home in disgrace, replaced by Hulagh Alagnni, whose considerable ambitions depend on two things: the wealth he hopes to gain by plundering Kesrith before humans come in, and the political power he will gain by doing this under the very witness of the two human observers with whom the treaty has burdened him.

But no one consulted the mri in these arrangements. They were a small presence on Kesrith, a few old men and an old she'pan, a queen-mother. The only warrior able to fight was young Niun s'Intel, and he had not been permitted. So the regul took no account of them, letting them go about their business in their remote edun, or House, high in the hills above the geyser-riddled flats. . .until weather turned, delaying Hulagh's planned evacuation and plunder and running him up against the deadline on which human forces will arrive to take possession of Kesrith. Above all he fears any act that will lead to renewed war—fears for his own political future and for the very survival of his kind.

Then to bai Hulagh's horror, he learns that another ship is coming in ahead of that deadline, while his own vessel is helplessly grounded: and that ship is Ahanal, *which carries not only mri. . .but every mri that is known to survive of all the forces and settlements and ships that have ever gone out. The mri are all coming home, to their world and their she'pan. . .the She'pan of*

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the People. And they (if they only knew it) are no longer bound by their oath of service, for Hulagh knows he has violated that treaty in allowing the presence of the human observers, though he has carefully kept them hidden.

War is the dreadful prospect, mri out of regul control and fighting all whom they blame for their misfortunes.

And on the night Ahanal *lands, two men leave their separate places and go out onto the flats for separate reasons: Sten Duncan, a young human, seeks to find out for his stroke-paralysed superior Stavros just what it is the regul are keeping from them: they fear treachery.*

And Niun goes to Ahanal, *to meet the mri who have come to take them offworld—for it has been revealed to him that they are not native to Kesrith or any previous homeworld in his lore. . .but wanderers in the depths of space. . .and the She'pan bids them go to a voyage that will put Kesrith and all its ills behind them. Some of the old have departed into the desert, seeking death on a world they know; but Niun and his sister Melein are given hope of survival in a new age of their species.*

Then Niun meets Duncan, and realizes that they are free of their oath because of this presence—he delays killing Duncan in his perplexity. . .but the regul know of that meeting, and to avert war, strike at the port and the edun of the mri. Out on the flats, Niun watches in horror first as Ahanal *is destroyed and then as the edun is leveled. All his species is accounted for by those two attacks . . . .and, alone now, he lacks the will to destroy Duncan, who is likewise hunted by the regul.*

But in the ruins of the edun they find Melein still alive, though injured: by the death of the others, she has inherited the she'panate and now rules a dead people and one last warrior, her brother. Duncan has assisted to save her, and Melein also omits to order his death: he is permitted to go with them and to carry their supplies as they seek the desert.

And now appears another survivor of the edun, a great dus, *one of the beasts of Kesrith that have always served the warrior-caste. This one had disdained Niun's previous attempts to win it, but it joins him now. They are bound into the backlands, wherever Melein will decide to lead them—to survive for a time, until Duncan's people come to finish what the regul began.*

XIX

THE DAY CAME QUIETLY, with only the sounds of the wind and the dus' breathing. Niun looked and found Melein already awake, sitting crosslegged in the doorway, outlined by the dawn. She was composed as though she had sat so for a long time, arranging thoughts in private in the last hours of the night.

He rose, while Duncan lay still insensible; and went to her and settled on the cold sand, near the fever-warmth of the drowsing dus. His legs were weak with the poison and his arm was stiff and hot to the shoulder, but these would pass. His

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mind was still calm, with the muddled thoughts of the dus yet brushing it; and he was not afraid, even considering their situation. He knew this for dus-courage that would melt when crisis came and a man needed to think; but it was rest, and he was glad for it. He thought perhaps Melein had enjoyed something of the same for her face was calm, as though she had been meditating on some private dream.

"Did you rest well?" he asked of her.

"As well as I needed. I was shaken yesterday. I think I shall still find a long walk difficult. But we will walk today."

He heard this and knew that she had come to some ultimate decision, but it would not be respectful to ask of it, to go on assuming that he was her kinsman, which he could no longer be.

"We are ready," he said.

"We are going by the way of Sil'athen," she said, "and further into the hills; and we will find a Shrine of which the Kel has known nothing in our generation. Before we two were born, it was ordered forgotten by the Kel. The Pana, Niun, never rested in the edun. It was a time of war. The she'pan did not think it good that the Pana be in the edun, and she was right."

He touched his brow in reverence, his skin chilled even to hear the things that she said; but his spirit rose at her words. They changed nothing, had no bearing on their own bleak chances; but the Holy existed, and even if they went to destroy it with their own hands, it would not have perished by enemies.

The Gods' mission, then. That was something worth doing, something he could well comprehend.

"Know this," she said further. "We will recover the Pana for ourselves, and we two will bear it to a place where we can be safe. And we will wait.

"We will wait until we can find a way off Kesrith, or until we know that there can be none. Does the Kel have an opinion?"

He considered, thought of Duncan's offer, thought of bringing it to her, and put it away in his mind. There would be a moment for that later, if they lived to do the one thing.

"I think," he judged carefully, "that we will end by killing humans and then by being hunted to our end. But for my part, I had as lief go to the human authorities and contract with them against regul. I am this bitter."

She listened to him attentively, her head tilted to one side, and she frowned. "But," she said, "there is peace between regul and humans."

"I do not think it will last. Not forever."

"But would humans not laugh—to consider one kel'en alone, trying to take service against all regul?"

"The regul would not laugh," said Niun grimly, and she nodded, appreciative of that truth.

"But I will not have this," she said. "No. I know what Intel planned: to take us into the Dark again, to take the long voyage and renew the People during that Dark. And I will not sell you into hire for any promises of safety. No. We two go our own way."

"We have neither Kath nor

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kel'e'ein," he cried, and dropped his voice at once to half-whisper, for he did not want Duncan waking. "For us there are no more generations, no renewing. We will never come out of that Dark."

She looked up with tranquility at the dawning. "If we are the last, then a quiet end; and if we are not the last, then the way to surest extinction for the People is to waste our lives in pursuit of tsi'mri wars and tsi'mri honors and all the things that have occupied the People in this unhappy age."

"What is there else?" he asked, which was a forbidden question, and he knew it when he had spoken it, and canceled it with a gestured refusal. "No, do as you will."

"We are free," she said. "We are *free*, Niun. And I will commit us to nothing but to find the Pana and to learn whether others of our kind survive."

He looked up and met her eyes and acknowledged her bravery with a nod of his head. "It is not possible that we do this," he said. "The Kel tells you this, she'pan."

"The Kel of the Darks," she said softly, "is not wholly ignorant, and therefore it is a harder service. No, perhaps it is not possible, but I cannot accept any other thing. Do you not believe that the Gods still favor the People?"

He shrugged, self-conscious in his ignorance, helpless as a kel'en was always helpless in games of words. He did not know whether she played ironies or not.

"I cast us both," she said then. "*Shon'ai.*"

This he understood, a mystery the Kel easily fathomed. He made a fist, a pantomime of the catch of *shon'ai*, and his heart lightened.

"*Shon'ai,*" he echoed. "It is good enough."

"Then we should be moving," she said.

"We are ready," he said.

Niun then gathered himself up and went to Duncan and shook him at the shoulder. "Come," he told Duncan, and while Duncan began to stir about, he made a pack of their remaining belongings. The water he meant to carry himself, and a small light flask also that he meant for Melein, for it was not wise to make Duncan independent in that regard, or to make her dependent, should it come to trouble—although neither he nor she, whole of limb and untroubled by enemies, needed a flask in a land where they knew every plant and stone.

He threw the bundle of supplies at Duncan's feet.

"Where are we going?" Duncan asked, without moving to pick it up. It was a civil question. Niun shrugged, giving him all the answer he meant to give, with the same civility.

"I am not your beast of burden," Duncan said, a thin, under-the-breath piece of rebellion. He kicked at the bundle, spurning it.

Niun looked at it, and looked at him, without haste. "The she'pan does not work with the hands. Being kel'en, I do not bear burdens while there are others to bear them. If you were dead, I would carry it. Since you are not, you will carry it."

Duncan seemed to consider how seriously that was meant, and reached the correct conclusion. He

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picked up the bundle and slid his arms into the ropes of the pack.

Then Niun did find some pity for him, for the man was a manner of kel'en and avowed he was not of a lower caste; but he would not fight for his standing. It was a matter of the yin'ein, *a'ani*, honorable combat; and Niun reckoned that without mri weapons, the human was as helpless as a kath'en.

Perhaps, Niun thought, he had been wrong to insist upon this point, and to have taken some small part of the weight upon himself would not have overburdened his pride. It was one thing to war against the tsi'mri kel'en's species; it was another to break him under the weight of labor in Kesrith's harsh environment.

He said nothing, all the same. It troubled him, the while they started out together, the three of them, and the dus lumbering along by his side. It was difficult question, how it was honorable to deal at close quarters with a human.

It had been the death of the People, that humans refused *a'ani* and preferred mass warfare; and he began to realize now that humans simply could not fight.

Tsi'mri.

He felt fouled, deeply distressed by this realization. He wished to change what he had said, and could not, for his pride's sake. And he began to think over and over again of how bitter the war had been, that so many had perished without knowing the nature of the enemy.

But it was not his to change this, even now. His was not a caste that made ultimate decisions. He reminded himself of this, wondering how much Intel had known of the ways of the human species.

* * *

By the Deog'hal slash they ascended into the high hills, not following the usual track to Sil'athen lest some survivor down in the city find them the more easily and finish what had been begun at the edun. It was a hard climb, and one which took a great deal from Melein, and from Duncan, laboring as he was under his burden.

"I was too long sitting in the she'pan's tower," Melein breathed when they had come to the crest. She coughed and tried to smother it, while Duncan sank down in a heap, disengaged himself from the ropes and lay upon the pack.

Niun poured a little water to ease Melein's throat, and deep in his heart he was afraid for her, for Melein was not wont to be so easily tired; and he marked how she limped, and sometimes held her arm to her side.

"I think that you are hurt," he said softly.

She made a deprecating gesture. "I fell, closing the door to the storeroom. It is nothing."

He hoped that she was right in that. He gave her to drink again, spendthrift with the water, but it was likely that they would come upon a fresh supply soon enough. He drank sufficient himself to moisten his mouth, and saw the human looking at him with an intent gaze, unwilling to plead.

"For moisture only," he said, giving Duncan half a measure. "Be slow with it."

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The human drank as he himself had drunk, beneath the veil, keeping his face covered, and handed back the cap with a nod that achieved some grace.

"Where are we going?" Duncan asked again, his voice gone hoarse.

"Human," said Melein, startling them both, "why does it matter to you to know?"

Duncan drew a breath to answer at once but Niun reached out and caught his arm in a hard grip.

"Before you speak," Niun said to him, "understand that she is a she'pan. The Kel deals with outsiders; the she'pan does not. You are honored that she even looks at you. If you speak a word that offends her, I will surely kill you out of hand. So perhaps you will be more comfortable to direct your words to me, so that you will not offend against her."

Duncan looked from one to the other of them, as though he thought they were making mock of him, or threatening him in some way he could not comprehend.

"I am very serious," said Niun. "Direct your answer to me."

"Tell her," said Duncan then, "that I am interested in returning to my people alive. Tell her what I told you last night. That offer still stands. I may be about to get you offworld."

"Duncan," said Melein, "I already know what you would like to ask, and I will not answer yet. But you may tell us when your people will come. You know that, surely."

Duncan hesitated, in evident distress, weighing their purposes. "A matter of days," he said in a low voice. "A very few days, maybe sooner than I would figure. And they're going to find ruins at the city, and the regul will be there to tell them whatever story they like about what happened night before last."

"Tsi'mri," said Melein deprecatingly, which Duncan did not understand.

"The she'pan means," Niun answered his look, "that what outsiders do is not our concern. We have no brothers and no masters. We do not serve regul any longer. Perhaps you do not understand, Duncan, that we are the last mri. The ship *Ahanal* contained all the survivors of the war, and the edun contained the rest; and the regul know us, understanding that if they do not finish what they began at the port, we are likely to deal them hurt. Being regul, they will not wish to meet us face to face to do this, and they will probably try to convince your species to do the work for them. You see how it is. You do better not to press us with questions. There are things to be thought of in their time, should this happen or should that happen—but you do well not to ask so that we will not have to think of it."

Duncan absorbed all that answer in silence, and sat with his arms wrapped about his knees, hands clenched until the knuckles went white.

"Duncan," Melein said then, "it is a saying among us that *Said is done*. So we do not say, so that we are not obligated to do. We do not trap with words, as the regul do. Ask no more questions."

And she held out her left hand to Niun, gesturing that she wanted

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help to rise. It hurt her, although he was very careful.

"There are clouds," she observed, looking toward the east. "May they descend to the regul."

* * *

By afternoon the sky was entirely overcast, sparing them the heat of the direct sun, bringing a chill to the air; and it became clear that the clouds were doing as Melein had wished they would do, and that upon the ruin of the city and the port would come storm.

Once, when she gazed over her shoulder toward the plain and looked upon the lightnings that flashed in that shadowed quarter, she held some impulse that made the dus moan in startlement and shy off from her. Niun did not question that it was Melein that had caused it, for he knew himself innocent, and the dus sought his side afterward.

But the clouds shed no water on them, and their flasks were only a quarter full when they came to the end of the long upland rise and entered the flat highland. By late afternoon Duncan was staggering with weariness and would gladly have halted at any time, but Niun considered the possibility of aircraft seeking them out and was not willing to stop in the open, not for Duncan's sake.

He looked often at Melein, anxious for her, but she walked without appearing to suffer overmuch.

And toward evening there was a luin-cluster on the horizon, twisted trunks like a mirage against the leaden sky, bare limbs tufted with small leaves only at the ends.

"There is water," Niun told Duncan. "Tonight will be an easy camp, and you will have enough to drink."

And Duncan, who had begun to lag, expended a last effort and kept the pace they, unburdened, set toward the trees.

And soon they walked among the gnarled trunks, careless.

" 'Ware!" Melein cried, seeing it even as Niun did, the glassy strands spread in the evening light.

Niun whipped up his pistol and fired before Duncan had time to know what had befallen him; and the windflower died, giving forth a stench, its glassy tendrils blackened. But where it had touched Duncan's flesh, on hands and forehead, the red sprang up at once, and Duncan, his clothing covered with the tendrils, fell and writhed on the sand in agony.

"Ch'au!" Niun cursed the human's stupidity. "Still! lie still!"

And Duncan lay quietly then, shuddering as with the *av-tlen's* point Niun lifted the tendrils from his flesh. Niun pulled them from the cloth too, and urged Duncan to his feet, there to stand while he inspected the black robes for any transparent remnant.

Then Duncan went a few feet away and was dryly sick for some few moments.

Niun cleansed the *av-tlen* in the sand and with it cut the trunk of a liun that had not been poisoned by the windflower. He took from his belt a small steel tube and drove it easily into the soft wood, and the sweet liquid began to flow, pure

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and clean of Kesrith's dust.

He filled the first flask and gave it to Melein, so that she might indulge her thirst to the full, for there were many luin present. He drank the second, rapidly filled from a second tree; and the third he filled he took to Duncan, who had not succeeded in being as sick as he doubtless wished to be after his shock. The human simply lay on the ground and shuddered.

"It is a point worth remembering," Niun echoed Eddan's words to him on a less painful encounter, "that where there is water on Kesrith, there are enemies and predators. The pain is all, and you are lucky. It will pass. If you had been alone, you would have been wholly ensnared, and the windflower would have been the end of you."

"I saw nothing," Duncan said, and swallowed a sip of the water, fighting the pain.

"When you walk among luin, walk with the light in your face, so that the strands of windflowers cast across the light and shine; and mind where you step." He indicated the place where a little burrower had its lair, a place marked by a tiny depression. He flung a pebble. The sand erupted and there was the flash of a pale back, gone again as the little burrower dived and fluttered its mantle, settling sand over itself again.

"They are venomed," said Niun, "and even a little one can make a man very sick. But since they grow large enough to engulf a dus whole, the venom does not matter much to us. Burrowers lair among the luin, and in shadowed places, and among rocks where there is sand to cover them. There are not many large ones. The ha-dusei eat them, if they do not eat the dusei, before they grow to great size. There is a very large old one by the way we will pass tomorrow. I think it has been there all my lifetime. Burrowers are like regul: when they grow so big, they do not move much."

The little one, disturbed and angry, fluttered off under the sand, a moving ripple, to settle again deeper among the luin.

There was a general shifting about of others of its kind, and a jo, harmless, detached itself from its successful bark-imitation on a luin and fluttered away through the twilight.

"Drink your fill," Niun said to the distressed human, feeling pity for him, and Duncan slowly did so while Niun made a supper of the supplies they had brought. In time they would make many a meal off the burrowers themselves, meat unpalatable and as tough as rubber; but this night Melein was suffering, and they had starved the night before and most of the day. He was extravagant, and gave to Duncan an equal share with them, considering that he had confiscated what of Duncan's gear was useful, including his rations.

Across the sky, toward the lowlands, there was continued lightning, ill luck for the regul.

And they rested with the dus for warmth, and with its ward-impulse to keep the ha-dusei at bay, so that they slept secure that night in the luingrove.

In the morning they gathered up their gear once more; and Niun considered the matter with a gnawing

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of his lip and a frown, and finally, brusquely, snatched several rolls of cloth and the food from the human's burden and did them up himself.

"In the case that you do not watch where you walk," Niun said in a harsh tone, "the burrower that gets you will not have our shelter and our food."

The human, marked across the brow by a bloody stripe of his encounter with the windflower, looked at him and Niun did not think that the human would have forgotten his words of the day previous, that he would carry no burden. He glowered at Duncan, discouraging any reminder of this.

"I learn quickly," Duncan said, and Niun reckoned that among the things Duncan had learned was the art of answering a kel'en civilly.

XX

The air was unimaginably foul, tainted by so many frightened regul. It was dark, save for the lights on the two sled-consoles and the four life-battery lamps the shelter provided. Power elsewhere was out. The water-plants were down. There was talk of seeking water Kesrithi style, from the land, but none of the younglings were sure that they could accomplish this; and they were not anxious to go out into the contaminated exterior, or across the seething flats.

Hulagh had not yet ordered them. He would do so, Stavros did not doubt, when he himself began to thirst.

The sleds were on battery. To this also there was a limit; but Stavros and Hulagh, elders, consumed vital power as they consumed food and water, unrationed, because it was unquestioned that elders must be supported by the young. Stavros found it within him to pity the harried secretary, Hada, who dispensed the food and water that remained to three hundred other younglings, and likewise ministered to Hulagh and himself. They were jammed into the shelter so tightly that the youngest and least could not lie down to sleep; but the sleds were accorded their maneuvering room.

The younglings gave from themselves a deference that was next to worship; indeed their whole hope for survival centered on the presence of elders among them. They talked little. They all faced Hulagh, row upon row of bone-shielded faces and blunt heads, and eyes glittered in the almost-dark and nostril-slits worked in a slow rhythm that seemed to Stavros, in a moment of bizarre humor, to be tending toward unison.

And in the long hours he noted something else, that there were not a few who fell asleep, and did not awaken.

Bai, favor, he signaled, spelling slowly in regul symbols on the screen. *I think some of the younglings are ill.*

Hulagh's great body heaved as he looked, and heaved again with a hiss of mirth. "No, reverence-human, they are asleep. They are to sleep until your assistance comes. They consume less in that state."

And in increasing numbers the young, beginning with the youngest, slipped into that state,

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until almost all were dormant.

And bai Hulagh himself began to drowse. He recovered from this with a jerk of his body and a rumbled curse, and called to Hada. "Food," he ordered. "Be quick, witless."

The thick, sour-smelling soup was offered likewise to Stavros, but he declined it, almost retching. This troubled Hada, but it gave the portion to Hulagh, between whose thin lips the paste disappeared rapidly.

"You do not eat," Hulagh observed.

I do not need to eat, Stavros replied, and in honesty: *Your food does not agree with me. But I would have soi.*

Hada scrambled to accommodate this wish, feverish, almost maniac in its desire to please. It offered the hot liquid to Stavros' good hand, with a straw for his ease, and hovered near him.

Hulagh laughed, a rumbling, a series of hisses. "Go, egg-stealer, and sit with the other younglings."

And Hada visibly cringed, and slunk aside, on small, tottering steps.

"Hada knows," Hulagh explained, waxing almost affable under the pressure of their long wait, under the need to be pleasant with humans and human ways, "that if we are here much longer, there will be shorter rations; and Hada is greedy. I indulge this youngling. I shall keep it if it continues to please. I may keep all. I have lost, " he added sadly, "my own."

Lost with the ship; Stavros understood. *My sorrow, reverence.*

"And mine for the loss of your own youngling." The great gossamer-clad monster sighed and lapsed into a long reverie.

And Stavros, his sled nose to nose with that of Hulagh, hurled his temper at the weak fingers of his left hand. They gave only slightly. The right hand clenched. He had ceased to fear that the paralysis would spread, or that it would affect his mind, but he was ceasing to hope that it would ever ease completely. He remained grateful for regul technology, if not for regul.

Hulagh's condolences were honest, doubtless, but it did not mean that the regul's hands were clean in the matter. Stavros regarded the drowsing regul with narrowed eyes. Now, shut in a shelter with the regul, was an inopportune moment to state the obvious, that Hulagh had had somewhat to do with the disappearance of Duncan, and that Stavros, conversely, was innocent in the loss of the bai's ship and the younglings aboard it.

In regul morality, disposing of a youngling was a serious matter, but only in terms of the affront offered its elder and its doch. A regul would as soon face an elder's wrath over the loss of a youngling as that same elder's wrath over some matter of shady dealing discovered in trade; and Stavros reckoned that the same ruthless logic just might apply to eliminating a lone elder whose doch could prove hostile, given the information that elder possessed.

Regul did not lie, he still believed, but they were fully capable of murder, whereby lies could be rendered unnecessary. And they feared him on the one hand and hoped for his help on the other, and

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he fostered that hope in them as he cherished his own life.

He began to reckon the mind of bai Hulagh of doch Alagn, that here was a desperate fellow, one who had suffered a very dangerous loss in the eyes of his own kind. And therefore, while it seemed profitable, Hulagh, like a good merchant-prince, was dealing for compromise.

It was a compromise out of which humankind could win a great deal.

But part of that settlement, Stravos was determined, would be an accounting for a certain lost SurTac, on whom Stavros had settled rather more affection than he had admitted to himself. He had not loved his own children, of whom he had seen little, locked as he was in the reclusive life of a scholar of Kiluwa, or later, while he was busy in government and at the university. He had found many other things more important than to trouble himself with the issue of several of his young passions, that had given him first an assortment of sons and thereafter grandchildren and great-grandchildren—who sought him out mostly because a Kiluwan connection was prestigious. Some of them, he knew, hated him with the same dedicated zeal with which they sought promotions based on his influence.

But he missed Duncan. Duncan had come, like others who had ridden Stravos' reputation to reach for wealth, with the motives of ambition; and yet Duncan had given him a constant and earnest duty, earnest in his attempts to penetrate Kiluwan formality, simply because it was

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Duncan's nature to do so.

Stavros had never learned how to answer that. Nor, for the regul, did he admit to grief, which they would not have understood. But in addition to an accounting that the regul owed for Kiluwa, there was that for an inconsequential SurTac.

He did not, all the same, regret having sent Duncan, even at such cost. Events had damaged the regul and exacted satisfaction of them, and placed them at human mercy; and this was very much to Stavros' gratification. This was partial payment for Kiluwa.

It would be full payment when he seized the reins of control from bai Hulagh, and began to bend doch Alagn into agreement with humans. This was revenge of a sort that both Hulagh and Kiluwa could appreciate—the more so when he ascertained those who among regul were directly responsible for Kiluwa and found the means to deal with them. Being Kiluwan, Stavros entertained a hatred specific and logical: There was a species called regul; but the species called regul had not destroyed Kiluwa. This had been wrought by one doch; and its name was Holn, and it was not represented here.

There had been a decimation of Holn at their landing. This did not satisfy Stavros, who was not interested in bloodshed. It was the decline of Holn he wanted, its elimination from power among regul.

And Hulagh, controlled, an ally of humankind, could become the instrument of this policy.

"Elder," Hulagh rumbled at last, "it is certain that you have authority over your people?"

Unless mri intervened and started something wider, Stavros replied. *I have authority over the force that is coming to Kesrith.*

"Favor," said Hulagh. "The mri will no longer be a factor in relations between us. They are gone. There are no more mri."

This was news. Stavros flashed a question-sign, unadorned by words.

"The ship," said Hulagh, "contained all the survivors of mri-kind. We have disposed of this plague that kept our two species at war."

Hulagh had waited to divulge that piece of news. Stavros heard it, at first appalled at such a concept—the destruction of a sapient species—and then suspicious. But the regul did not lie. He began to contemplate the possibilities of a universe without the mri, and found the possibilities for human profit enormous.

"It is clear," said Hulagh, "that total re-arrangement of human-regul relations is in order. Doch Alagn might find interest in helping this come about."

Stavros was shocked a second time, and recognized his dismay as a human reaction, based on a morality to which Hulagh could not possibly subscribe. There was no particular reason that doch Alagn should refrain from an offer that, in a human state, would amount to treason. Doch Alagn was in financial and political difficulty. Hulagh was seeking alignment with the powers that had control of the resources he desired.

Humanity's grudge, Stavros answered after due thought, *is with doch Holn. It would be possible to*

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arrive at new accommodations with advantage to both our interests.

Hulagh's lips parted in a regul smile. A slow hiss betokened his pleasure. "We shall explore this," he said. "We shall, most excellent Stravos."

And he awakened Hada and ordered soi, and remembered this time to order it sweetened, to Stavros' personal preference.

But before it was prepared, Hada came puffing back, waving his hands in agitation.

"The ship," he breathed. "Be gracious, elders, the human ship, early—communications report—"

Hulagh's gesture cut the youngling off abruptly. The bai's lips continued parted, his nostrils dilated in what Stavros had learned was an expression of anxiety. The bai's total attitude was that of a man with a nervous smile, displaying good manners amid subdued terror.

"You will surely wish then," said bai Hulagh, "to greet these representatives of your people and explain the situation. Assure them of our regret for the condition of the port, reverence."

We will manage, Stavros answered, beside himself with apprenhension and restraining it, remembering how important it was that Hulagh be reassured. *Have confidence, reverence, that you have nothing to dread if your younglings will remain calm and not hamper operations.*

And he turned his sled toward the control section of the shelter, following the rolling gait of Hada Surag-gi who, by regul standards, was almost running.

* * *

The big doors of the shelter opened, and beams glared through the dim interior, the lights handled by suited men, fantastic shapes, who walked heavy-footed through the ranks of dormant younglings. The door was closed again, a precaution. The second man used a counter, reckoning what radiation might have entered the shelter. Conscious younglings scurried to clear them a path, chittering in terror.

Stavros slid his vehicle forward, faced a suited form and saw the blind-glassed head pause in an attitude of astonishment.

"Consul Stavros?"

The tab on the suit read "Galey" and the rank was lieutenant.

"Yes," Stavros said, and turned the communications screen by remote and spelled out a message on the basic-alphabet module, not trusting his slurred speech for complicated messages. *I am inconvenienced by an accident. Speech is awkward, but prosthetics are very adequate. Speak normally to me and watch the screen. Be respectful of these regul. It will be necessary to transfer them to safety if you cannot guarantee normal operations here in the building.*

"Sir," Galey said, seemingly confused by the situation. He drew a breath and let it go. "You're in command down here. What instructions? I'm afraid the power is going to be a major problem. We can possibly get a crew working on it, and you seem clean of contamination, but there are some considerable hot spots toward the port. The station is

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intact. We would rather evacuate."

Building can be occupied? Liveable?

"This building? Yes, sir. It seems so."

Then we stay. Untoward weather a problem here. I have rest under control.

"The mri, sir," Galey said. "We're not clear what happened here."

We have a problem, Lt. Galey, but we're resolving it. Kindly dispose your men so that we can resume normal operations here in the building. The communications station is accessible through that door. You will excuse me if I do not go with you.

"Yes, sir," said Galey, and gave his courtesies to the regul also, wooden and perfunctory. The marines with him began to move about, performing various duties—on suit phones, doubtless, where regul would not be privy to exchanges of comment and instruction.

"You deal with younglings," Hulagh observed. "Favor. Are there other elders involved here?"

Other authorities, Stavros reckoned the bai's meaning, authorities who could complicate agreements already made between them. *My apologies, bai Hulagh. This was an older youngling. And the elder who commands them must, as you surely remember from the treaty, defer to me where it regards the administration of Kesrith and its area. There is, however, one matter wherein his authority and mine might tend to cross.*

"And this one matter, human bai?"

My missing assistant is military personnel. The bai of the arriving ship may feel that he can settle this matter best. It might provide an occasion for him to intrude his authority into my domain here. Naturally I do not wish this. I feel that it would smooth matters over were it possible for answers to be given in this matter of my youngling.

Hulagh's nostrils fluttered in rapid agitation. "Favor, reverence. We might suggest a search of the Dus-plain, where there was conflict between my younglings and the mri outlaws. It is an unpleasant surmise, but if there are remains to be found. . . ."

Stavros looked on the anxious bai without mercy. *It is then the conclusion of the bai that this youngling is dead?*

"It is most probable, reverence."

But if he were not, it is more likely that one of your staff could direct a search with more success than one of the ship's officers might. This is possible, is it not, bai? It would greatly augment my authority here and ease negotiations between us if it were possible that this lost youngling could be recovered. He is, of course, merely a youngling, and his experiences during the mri action would doubtless influence his mind to hysteria and cloud his judgments, so that no testimony he could give could be taken seriously. But it would please me if he were recovered alive.

The bai considered these things, and the understandings implicit in the words. "Indeed," said bai Hulagh, "there is such an expert on my staff, a person familiar with the terrain. With your staff's coopera-

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tion, a search could be arranged at once."

My gratitude, reverence. I will see to the disposition of necessities with the ship.

And Stavros turned his sled away, seeking out Galey, while his hearing caught bai Hulagh urgently summoning Hada Surag-gi.

The reaction began to strike him. He found it difficult for the moment to concentrate on the numerical signals that activated the various programs of the sled. He found his eyes misting. This was unaccustomed. He had his emotions under control, however, by the time he swung the sled in with casual nonchalance beside Galey, who did not seem to know whether to offer condolences or congratulations on survival.

"You're alone here, sir?" Galey asked.

As you have noticed, difficulties abound. No delays. Is Koch in command up there?

"Yes, sir."

Then get me contact with him directly. I can patch this console in with the main board. Are you able to get a ship down here with sufficient personnel to staff work crews and give me office staff?

"Not quickly. The port's completely gone. But the station is in good shape. Servos everywhere." Galey bent over the console of the com unit, fingering regul controls helplessly.

"Here," Stavros said, with some satisfaction, and keyed in and started the sequence of changes that put them through to the warship *Saber*, which had brought them all that clutter of personnel that would begin to make Kesrith human: soil experts, scientists, technicians.

And weapons.

His command, Kesrith, his. There was no med staffer going to rule him unfit to govern; and deep in his heart he knew that he needed that hulking merchant-prince of the Alagn as much as doch Alagn presently needed him.

He saw the shock on the face of the com officer of *Saber;* and at once that face vanished, replaced by that of Stavros' military counterpart, Koch.

"Stavros?" Koch asked.

A little difficulty speaking, he keyed the answer, replacing the visual. *We have regul stranded down here. Stand by to assist us with on-world operations. We need food, drinkable water.*

"We were not prepared for regul nationals."

Unforeseen circumstances. All decisions regarding Kesrith and regul are mine. Situation here is under control. Presently seeking my aide, possible casualty of attack by mri. Hot areas reportedly confined to port. I request military personnel detached from Saber to my command until we can clean up.

"Excellency," said Koch, "the medical facilities of *Saber* are at your disposal if you will care to come up to the station."

Negative. Regul services are adequate. The situation is too urgent. My condition is good, considering. I am pursuing matters under my authority granted as governor of Kesrith. Send down scientists, military aides, all attached personnel and equipment as soon as area is cleared.

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"It may be advisable to wait."

Send down personnel as requested.

There was a long delay. "All right," said Koch. "A medic will accompany the party."

On Kesrith, Stavros keyed, *medic will await my convenience.*

Koch digested this also. At last he nodded, accepting. "You have the authority, right enough. But ship's personnel stay under my command. You'll have the civs as soon as we can find solid ground for them. Starship *Flower* is attached to your personal service, with my compliments, sir. She's probe, though, not combat. Does the situation warrant immediate armed support?"

Negative.

"There is weather down there."

This is evidently frequent. Wait, then. We are pursuing operations here with available personnel. You are invited to come planetside and exchange courtesies when we have the wreckage cleared.

A sled hummed into the vicinity. Stavros heard it and put them momentarily on visual again from his side, watching with satisfaction as Koch beheld a regul elder for the first time.

This is bai Hulagh, Stavros told him, disconnecting the visual. *A most influential regul, sir, if you please. We have achieved a certain necessary cooperation here, which is to the advantage of both species.*

"Understood," Koch said slowly, and seemed utterly taken aback: a military man, Koch, born and bred. He had been presented a situation with which he could not deal, and fortunately recognized it.

"You'll get your help," Koch said, and Stavros closed out the communication with an inward satisfaction, casting a look at Galey.

Scan the area here, he directed the lieutenant. *And when you've made sure of where it's safe, we'll start clearing these younglings back to normal duties. This is the bai's staff. All due considerations to them, Lt. Galey.*

"Reports are coming in," Galey said. "The whole area seems cool and secure. The building seals held very well."

Stavros breathed a sigh of relief.

"My younglings," said Hulagh, "will find means of restoring the water and repairing the collectors for the power." He waved a massive hand. "Hada will attend other matters, given use of transport. I believe some of the vehicles at the water-plant may have survived intact."

XXI

At the entrance to Sil'athen a dus met them, warding with such strength that Niun's dus shied off. And there in the rocks, half-buried in the sands, lay Eddan's remains; and not far away lay a tangle of black that had been Liran and Debas, and gold that had been Sathell.

Melein veiled herself and drew aside, being she'pan and unable to look upon death; but Niun went and reverently arranged the visor over Eddan's face, and it was long before he could look up and meet eyes with the human that hovered uncertainly by.

He cleansed his hands in the

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sand, and made the reverence-sign, and rose. The human also made such a sign, in his own fashion, a respect which Niun accepted as it was given.

"They chose this end." he said to Duncan, "and it was better for them here than for those that stayed."

And he poured a little of their precious water and turned his back to wash, hands and face, and veiled again. When he looked up at the rocks, he saw two other dusei, that began to come down from their height; and he gave way at once.

His own dus came between and tried to approach the three warding beasts that had formed a common front against them. Noses extended, they circled back and forth, and then the great, gentle creature that had been Eddan's, or so Niun thought it, reared up and cried out, driving the dus away. But the smallest of the three hesitated between, and then followed the stranger-dus of Niun, and its fellow came after.

The largest, Eddan's, gave a plaintive moan and retreated from these traitor-dusei, that he no longer knew. Niun felt its anger, and trembled; but when he moved away from this place, not alone his own dus came, but the two that had been of Liran and Debas, a tight triangle with his own. They called and moaned, and would not yet suffer Niun to come near them, but they came away from their duty all the same, choosing life, leaving other matters to the dus of Eddan, who settled by his dead and remained faithful.

"*Lo'a-ni dus,*" Niun saluted that one softly, with great respect; but he shut his heart to it, because the warding-impulse was too strong to bear.

And he shouldered his burden again and began walking, his course and Duncan's converging with that of Melein.

There was no need to speak of what they had found. The dusei walked ahead of them, and now and then one would make to go back and go toward Duncan, but Niun's dus would not allow this and constantly circled toward the rear to prevent them when they did so. Soon they seemed to understand that this particular tsi'mri was under safe-conduct, and gave up their attempts on him.

They were at the entrance to the inner valley of Sil'athen, and here was another sort of warder. Niun saw it across the flat sweep of sand, and touching the human on the arm, he bent and picked up a tiny stone. He hurled it far, far out across the flat sand, toward the central depression.

It erupted, a circumference twenty times the length of a dus, a cloud of sand from the edge of the burrower's mantle as the creature rose and dived again a few lengths farther.

The human swore in a tone of awe.

"I have shown you," said Niun, "so that you will understand that a man without knowledge of this land, and without a dus to walk with him, will not find his way across. There are said to be larger ones across the great sands than what you saw. The dusei smell them out. They smell out other dangers too. Even mri do not like to

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walk this country alone, although we can do it. I do not think you can.''

''I understand you,'' said Duncan.

They walked quietly thereafter, near the wall of the cliffs where the safe course was, past caves sealed and marked with stones; and the strange shapes of Sil'athen's rocks one by one passed behind them, ringing them about and shutting off view of the way they had come.

''What is this place?'' Duncan asked in a lowered voice as they passed the high graves of the she'panei.

''*Nla'ai-mri,*'' said Niun. ''Sil 'athen, the burrying-place of our kind.''

And thereafter Duncan said nothing, but looked uneasily from one side of the valley to the other as they passed, and once backward, over his shoulder, where the wind erased their tracks, wiping clean all the trace that men had ever walked this way.

Melein led them now, walking at their head, her hand on the back of Niun's dus, which ambled slowly beside her, and the beast even seemed to enjoy that contact. Deep into the canyons they went, by a path that Niun had never walked, down the aisle of rock that belonged to the tombs of the she'panei. Here there were signs graven on the rocks—names, perhaps, of ancient she'panei, or directions. Melein read them, and Niun trusted her leading, that she knew their way although she herself had never walked it.

She tired, and it seemed at times that she must surely stop, but she would not, only pausing for breath now and again, and walking on. The sun that was at noon became the fervent blaze of afternoon, and then sank so that they walked in the cold shadow of the cliffs, dangerous if not for the protecting dusei that probed the way.

Deep in that shadow they came to the blind end of the cliffs, and Niun looked to Melein, suddenly wondering if she had not after all lost their way, or whether this was where she meant that they should stop. But she gazed upward at a trail that he had not seen until he followed the direction of her look, a trail that could not be seen at all save from this vantagepoint. It led up and up into the red rocks, toward a maze of sandstone pillars that thrust fingers at the sky.

''Niun,'' Melein said then, and cast a glance backward.

He looked where she did, toward Duncan, who, exhausted in the thin air, had slumped to rest over his pack. The dusei were moving toward him. One extended a paw. Duncan froze, lying still, his head still pillowed on the pack.

''Yai!'' Niun reproved the dus, who guiltily retracted the curious paw. The dusei in general retreated, radiating mingled confusion.

And in his own mind was unease at the thought of entering that steep, tangled maze with the human in their company, where a misstep could be the end of them.

''What shall I do with him?'' he asked of Melein in the high language, so that Duncan could not understand. ''He should not be here. Shall I find a way to be rid of him?''

''The dusei will manage him,''

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she said. "Let him alone."

He started to protest, not for his own sake, but from fear for her; but she did not look as though she were prepared to listen.

"He will go last when we are climbing," he said, and gathering in his belly all the same was a knot of fear.

Intel had seen the future clearly: *I have an ill feeling,* she had said the night they all died; and he had such a dread now, a cold, clear premonition that here was a point of no return, that here he was losing some chance, or passing something by; and the human wound himself deeper and deeper into his mind.

He did not want him. He carried Duncan in his mind the way he carried the memories of the attack, indelible. He looked at the human and shuddered with sudden and vehement loathing, and found himself carrying the human's due burden, and not knowing what else to do with it. He fingered the pistol.

But he had been made kel'en for the honor of the People, not for outright butchery; and Melein had ordered otherwise, easing his conscience. He was not able to make such a decision. It was hers to say, and she had said, agreeing with his better conscience.

And suddenly Duncan was looking at him, and he slipped his fingers into his belt, trying to cover his thoughts and the motion at once.

"Come," he said to Duncan. "Come, we are going up now."

He set himself first on the narrow climb, and saw at once that Melein was scarcely able to make the climb on that eroded, unused track. He braced his feet where he could and reached for her hand, and she took his fingers crosshanded, to favor her injured side. He moved very carefully, each time that he must give a gentle pull to help her, for he saw her face and knew that she was in great pain.

Duncan came after, and the dusei last of all, clumsy and scattering rocks that rattled into the deep canyon, but their claws and great strength made them surer-footed than they looked to be.

And halfway, the sound of an aircraft reached them.

It was Melein's keen hearing that caught it first, between steps, as she was resting; and she turned and pointed where it circled above the main valley. It could not see or detect them where they were, and they were free to watch it, that tiny speck in the rosy half-light that remained.

Niun had view not only of that, but of Duncan's back as the human stood holding his place against a great boulder and looking outward at that ship; and he could not but think of how gladly Duncan would have run to signal it, and how he might well do so should he have some future chance.

They were no longer alone in the world.

"Let us climb," said Melein, "and get off this cliffside before the ship circles this way."

"Come," said Niun sharply to Duncan, with hatefulness in his tone; and Duncan turned and climbed after them, away from what in all likelihood was hope of rescue.

Looking down another time to help Melein, Niun searched the sky and did not see the aircraft; and that

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gave him no comfort at all. It could as easily appear directly overhead, passing the cliffs and sandstone fingers that gave them only partial cover.

And to his relief, once they gained the top of the cliffs, they were not faced with another flat, but went down a slight decline and followed a winding track among sandstone pillars that were now burning red against the purpling sky. There was strong wind, that skirled small clouds among the pillars and erased their tracks as they made them.

Duncan's dry cough began again, and continued a time until the human had caught his breath from the climb. They were at altitude and the air was far drier than in the lowlands. Here on the highlands, over much of the rest of the land, there was no rain, only blowing sand. A sea lay beyond, the The'asacha, but it was small and dead, as was the Alkaline Sea that bordered the regul city; and beyond that sea was a mountain chain, the Dogin, the mere skeletons of eroded mountains, that still were tall enough to cast the winds this way and that across the backbone of the continent, and generated storms that never fell on the uplands plain, but down-country, in the flats.

The clouds that rimmed the sky now were headed to shed their load of moisture on the lowlands, affording them neither concern for the storm nor hope of water from it. All that it would bring them was a dark sky and a hard and dangerous walk without benefit from the stars.

The sound of the aircraft intruded suddenly upon Niun's hearing: he shepherded human and dusei toward the deepest shadows, in the gathering dark; Melein had sought shelter at once. If the aircraft saw anything, it would be the image of a dus: a hot, massive silhouette for their instruments, something that was common enough to see in the wilds. If they fired at every dus on Kesrith, they would be a long time in their searching.

It passed. Niun, his fist entangled in the human's robes, a grip he had not relaxed since he herded them in together, let go and drew his first even breath.

"We may rest here a moment," said Melein in a thin, tired voice. "It is a long walk from here. I must rest."

Niun looked at her, seeing her pain, that she had tried so long to hide. On the climb he had felt her every wince in his own vitals. And they were not to rest long. He was distressed with this, feeling that she was spending her last strength against this urgency to go farther.

And without her, there would be nothing.

He took the cloth for a blanket and settled her against the side of the dus, into that friendly warmth, and was glad when she relaxed against that comfort he offered, and the line of pain knit into her brow eased and began to vanish.

"I will be all right," she said, touching his hand.

And then her eyes widened and he whirled about upon a shadow—a darting reach for a water-flask and Duncan was gone, into the maze of rocks in the dark.

Niun swore and sprang after him, hearing the moaning roar of the

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dusei at once behind him. He came around the side of a pillar, half expecting ambush, which would have been idiocy on the human's part, and did not meet it.

Nor was there sight or sign of Duncan.

And he had left Melein, and sweat broke out on him, only to think of what could happen should Duncan circle on them and attack her, hurt as she was.

Then the sound of a dus hunting arose, moaning carried on the wind, and that cry meant quarry sighted. He blessed the several Gods of his caste and ran toward that sound, pistol in hand.

So he met Melein, a pale wraith in the dark, and a dus beside her; and together they found the blind way where the other dusei had Duncan pent.

"Yai!" Niun called the beasts before they should close in and kill; and they wheeled in a slope-shouldered and truculent withdrawal, only enough to let Duncan rise from the ledge where he had been cornered. He would not. He huddled there, unveiled in the scramble he had made, his naked face contorted with exhaustion and anger. He coughed rackingly, and his nose poured blood.

"Come down," said Melein.

But he would not, and Niun went in after him, pushing the dusei aside. Then Duncan made to move, but he fell again, and sat still and

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dropped his head on his folded arms.

Niun took the strap of the water-flask and ripped it from Duncan's hand, and let him rest the moment, for they were all hard-breathing.

"It was a good attempt," said Niun. "But the next time I will kill you; it is a wonder that the dusei did not kill you this time."

Duncan lifted his face, jaw set in anger. He shrugged, a gesture of defiance, a gesture spoiled by an attack of helpless coughing.

"You would have signaled the airship," said Melein, "and brought them down on us."

Duncan shrugged again and came to his feet, accompanying them of his own accord in leaving the blind pocket. The dusei were still blood-roused and confused by being set on and drawn off their quarry; and Niun walked between them and the human. Melein followed after them as they went back to the place where they had abandoned their gear in the chase.

There they sank down where they had begun to rest, doubly exhausted now; and Niun stared at Duncan thoughtfully, thinking what might have happened, and what damage might have been done them.

There was Melein, fragile with her injury.

And there was an aircraft in the vicinity that wanted only the least error from them, the least slip into the open at the wrong moment, in order to locate and put an end to them.

"Cover your face," Niun said at last.

Duncan stared ar him sullenly, as though he would defy that order, but in the end he lowered his eyes and arranged the veil, and stared at him still.

The dus moaned and reared up.

"Yai!" Niun ordered him, and he subsided, swaying nervously. The dus-anger stirred his own blood. He fought it down and mastered it; a man must, who went among dusei, be more rational than they.

Duncan shifted aside, tearing his glance from them and the beasts, fixing it instead on the rock before them.

"We will move on," said Melein after a time, and pulled herself to her feet, carefully, painfully. She faltered, needing Niun's immediate hand to steady her.

But she set her hand then upon the dus, and the beast ambled out to the fore, and she was able to walk at its side, a slow pace and deliberate, the beast the only safety they had in this dark and close passage through the rocks.

Niun gathered up the water-flasks and left the human all the rest of the burden to carry, and hurried him on with a heavy hand, in among the two other dusei, before they should lose sight of Melein's pale figure.

The dusei, their oily hides immune to the poison of windflowers, their keen senses aware of other dangers, were the only means that they could dare to move after dark in this place; and the dark, as Melein was surely reckoning, was friendly to them as it would not be to those that pursued them.

The long walk led them into somewhat open areas, where they crossed fearfully exposed stretches of sand under the ragged clouds;

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and they made it in among the sandstone formations again as they heard the distant sound of the aircraft still in the area.

It came close. Duncan looked to the skies as though in hope, looked back sharply as Niun whipped the *av-tlen* from its sheath, a whisper of edged metal.

They faced each other, he and Duncan, standing still as the aircraft circled off again, out of hearing. Niun put the weapon back into its sheath with a practised reverse.

"Someone," Duncan said, his voice almost unrecognizable from his raw throat, "someone knows where to look for you. I somehow don't think my people would know that."

It was sense that struck cold to Niun's heart. He glanced at Melein.

"We cannot stop again for rest," she said. "They must not find us, not here. We must be at the place before light and come away again. Niun, let us hurry."

He pushed the human gently. "Come," he said.

"Is it her?" Duncan asked, nodding toward Melein without moving from where he stood. "Is it somehow to do with her that the regul keep after you?"

"It could not be," Niun said with assurance; and then a thought began to grow within him with horrid clarity, mental process working again where for a long time there had been only shock.

He looked again to Melein, spoke in the *mu'ara*, the high language.

"It could not be that they are hunting us. They could not know that we exist. What are two mri to them, with all the others dead? Or how could regul have reached the edun to know survivors left it? They could not have climbed among those ruins. It is this human, this cursed human. He has ties back in the city, a master, and for his sake the regul tracked me across the flats. If it is the regul, they are still on that trail. There are regul and humans at work together in this thing."

Her eyes grew troubled. "Let us go," she said suddenly. "Let us go now, quickly. I do not know what we will do with him, but we cannot settle it now."

"What are you saying?" Duncan demanded of them suddenly, in his hoarse voice. Perhaps there were certain words, a sideward look, that he had caught amid what they had said. Niun looked on him and thought uneasily that Duncan did suspect how little his life might weigh with them.

"Move," Niun said again, and pushed him, not gently. Duncan abandoned his questions and moved where he was told without argument.

And if it were Duncan that was hunted, and regul were tracking them for his sake, then, Niun thought, Duncan would ultimately have to go to the enemy in such a manner to stop that search, in such a manner that he could not betray to them the fact that a she'pan of the People was still alive.

O Gods, Niun mourned within himself, urged toward murder and dishonor, and not seeing any other course.

But the aircraft did not come again, and he was able to forget that threat in the urgency of their

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present journey, to put off thinking what he might have to do should the search be resumed.

* * *

Twice, despite Melein's wishes, they had to rest, for Melein's sake; and each time, when Niun would have stayed longer, she insisted and they walked again, at last with Niun holding her arm, her slim fingers clenching upon his against the unsteadiness of her legs.

And after the mid of the night they entered a narrow canyon that wound strangely, dizzily, and began to be a descent, where the walls leaned together threateningly over their heads and cast them into dark deeper than the night outside.

"Use your light," Melein said then. "I think there is stone overhead now entirely."

And Niun used Duncan's penlight, ever so small a beam, to find their footing. Down and down they went, a spiraling course and narrow, until they suddenly came upon a well of sky above them, where the night seemed brighter than the utter black they had traveled. Here was a widening, where walls were splashed with symbols the like of which had once adorned the edun itself.

The foremost dus reared aside, gave a roar that echoed horridly all up and down the passage, and Niun swung the beam leftward, toward the dus. There in a niche was a huddled knot of black rags and bones.

A guardian's grave.

Niun touched his brow in reverence to the unknown kel'en, and because he saw Duncan standing too near that holy place, he drew him back by the arm. Then he turned his light on the doorway where Melein stood, a way blocked by stones and sealed with the handprint of the guardian who had built that seal and set his life upon it.

Melein signed a reverence to the place with her hand, and suddenly turned to Duncan and looked at him sternly.

"Duncan, past the grave of the guardian you must not go or you will die. Stand here and wait. Touch nothing, do nothing, see nothing."

And to Niun: "Unseal it. It is lawful."

He gave the light to her and began, with the uppermost stones, to unseal what the guardian had warded so many years, a Shrine so sacred that a kel'en would wait to the death in warding it. He knew what choice the man had made. Food and water the kel'en had had, the liberty thereafter to range within sight of his warding-place, to hunt in order to survive; but when the area had failed him, when illness or harsh weather or advancing age had borne upon the solitary kel'en, he had retreated to this chosen niche to die, faithful to his charge, his spirit hovering over the place in constant guardianship.

And perhaps Intel herself had stood here and blessed the closing of this door, and set her kiss upon the brow of the brave guardian, and charged him with this keeping.

One of the kel'en who had come with her from Nisren, forty years ago, when the Pana had come to Kesrith.

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The rocks rattled away from the opening with increasing ease, until Melein could step over what was left, setting foot into the cold interior. The light held in her hand ran over the walls, touched writings that were the mysteries of the Shrine of Shrines, convoluted symbols that covered all the walls. For an instant Niun saw these, then sank down to his knees, face averted lest he see what he ought not.

For a time he could hear her tiniest step in that sacred place; and then there was no sound at all, and he dared not move. He saw Duncan against the far wall of the well, the dusei by him, and not even they moved. He grew cold in his waiting, and began to shiver from fear.

If she should not come back, he must still remain. And there was no stir of life within, not even the sound of a footstep.

One of the dusei moaned, its nerves afflicted with the waiting. It fell silent then, and for a long time there was nothing.

Then came a stirring, a quiet, rhythmic sound at first from within the Shrine; and at last he recognized it for the sound of soft weeping that became yet more bitter and violent.

"Melein!" he cried aloud, turning his eyes to that forbidden place; and shadows were moving within the doorway, a soft flow of lights. His voice echoed impiously around the walls and startled the dusei, and he scrambled to his feet, terrified to go in and terrified not to.

The sound stopped. There was silence. He went as far as the door, set his hand on it, nerved himself to go inside. Then he heard her light steps somewhere far inside, heard the sounds of life, and she did not summon him. He waited, shivering.

Things moved inside. There was the sound of machinery. It continued, and yet at times he heard her steps clearly. And he remembered with a panic that he had turned his back on Duncan, and whirled to see.

But the human only stood, no closer than Melein had permitted, and made no attempt to flee.

"Sit down," he bade Duncan sharply; and Duncan did so where he stood, waiting. Niun cursed himself for seeking after Melein and forgetting the charge she had set on him, to mind matters outside. He had put them both at Duncan's mercy had the human braved the dusei to take advantage of it. He settled on the sand himself, at such an angle that he could watch the human and yet steal glances toward the Shrine. He wrapped his arms about his knees, locked his hands with numbing force, and waited, listening.

It was a long, long wait, in which he grew miserable and changed position many a time. It seemed, in his sense of time, that it must be drawing toward dawn, although the overcast sky visible above them still was dark. And for a long, long time there was no sound at all from within the Shrine.

He hurled himself to his feet, finally, impatient to go again to the door, and then persuaded himself that he had no business to invade that place. In his misery he paced within the small area he had to pace, and looked down betimes at the human, who waited as he had been warned to wait. Duncan's eyes

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were unreadable in the almost-dark.

There was the sound of footsteps again. He turned upon the instant, saw the white flash of the penlight in the doorway. He saw Melein, a shadow, carrying the tiny light in her fingers, her arms clasped about something.

He went as close as he dared, saw that what she carried was some sort of casing, ovoid, made of shining metal. It had a carrying bar recessed into it at one end, but she bore it as she might have carried an infant, as something precious, although she staggered with the weight of it and could not step over the stones while bearing it.

"Take it," she said in a faint, strained voice, and he galvanized himself from his paralysis of will and reached forth his arms to receive it, dismayed by the weight of what she had managed to carry. It was cold and strange in balance, and he shivered as he took it against him.

And he was cold again when he saw her face, moisture glistening there in the reddish light that began to spread behind her, and shadows leaping within the Shrine from this side and that. She had turned once to look back, and then gazed toward him as from some vast distance.

Melein, he tried to say to her, and found it impossible. She was Melein still, and sister; but something else was contained in her, and he did not know how to speak to that, to call her back. He held out his hand, anxious at the fire behind her; and she took it and stepped over the rocks at the entry, and came with him. Her skin was cold. Her hand slipped lifelessly from his when she no longer needed him.

Duncan waited, and backed a little from the both of them, continuing to stare into the light that was growing behind them. Perhaps he understood that something of great value was being destroyed. He looked dazed, confused.

There was left only the strange, cold ovoid. Niun bore it in his arms as Melein started for the passage outward. He knew that he surely bore an essential part of the Pana, which name his caste could not even speak without fear, which a kel'en ought never to see, let alone handle.

The kel'en who had borne it here had devoted himself to die afterward, to hold it secret and undisturbed. This had been an honorable man, of the old way, the Kel of the Between; such a man would have been shocked at Niun s'Intel.

But he drew courage from holding it, for by it Melein had come into her power; he felt this of a surety. She had been only half a she'pan in his eyes, appointed by violence and necessity. But now he believed that the essential things had passed, that Intel had given her all that she needed.

She'pan, he could call her hereafter, believing implicitly that she knew the Mysteries. She had been face to face with the Pana, understanding what a kel'en could not. He did not envy her this understanding: the sound of her weeping still haunted him.

But she knew, and she led, and hereafter he trusted her leading implicitly.

They fled, they and the human and the dusei, out of the well,

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where smoke began to billow up, betraying them to the sky, where flames lit the walls with red and pursued them with heat. They entered the ascending turns of the way they had come, into the cold dark.

XXII

The Nom, in its first day of new operations, was aswarm with human technicians. Stavros reveled in the sound and scurry of humanity, after so long a time among the slow-moving regul. Reports came in, a bustle of human experts adding their agility to the technology of regul in repairs of the damaged plants, in clearing the wreckage left by the storm and the fighting.

And at a point judged stable enough to support a ship, probe *Flower* rested her squat body out on the height to the side of the city opposite the ruined port: a small vessel for a star-capable craft, a ship without the need for a vast secure landing area, her design enabling her to operate in complete independence.

It had been a fortunate decision that brought several such probes on the mission, against the need for such difficult landings, despite their lack of defense against attack. *Saber* still rested up at the station, spacemade and spacebound, a kilometer long and incapable of landing anywhere.

Flower, despite the name, was an ungainly shell, without fragility, without exposed vanes, without need of lading gantries and docks; she was an ugly ship, meant for plain, workman-like duties.

She brought technicians, scientists, those who were already beginning to sift through the remnants of Kesrith's records, to sample the air, the soil, to perform the myriad tasks that would start to appropriate the world to human colonists.

"Favor," bai Hulagh had said, seeing operations commence. "We regret, in the light of this new good feeling, the unfortunate destruction of our equipment in the calamity at the port. We might have been of much assistance."

Regul younglings in general were not so easily adaptive. They fretted at the nearness of humans, and preferred to work in their own groups. They made it no secret that they would gladly be off Kesrith now, to seek the security of their own kind in regul space.

But Hulagh had taken some few of them into his office within the Nom and when the younglings emerged, they had smiles for humans and great courtesy, and a powerful fear of the bai.

Until the storms descended, and the dusei returned.

The report first came in from the water-plant, from Galey's group, that reported to *Flower* that there were animals moving in large numbers there upon the heights; and *Flower* confirmed it, and flashed the same to the biologists, and in the doing of it, to Stavros.

Stavros locked his sled into the track that would take him to the far side of the Nom, and whisked through several changes to the observation deck, disengaged, and went on manual through the doors and out into the acrid wind.

A ruddy bank of cloud was sweeping in, and there, there, all

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around the visible horizon, sat the dusei.

A chill went over him that had nothing to do with the gale, or the biting smell of Kesrith's rains. He sat in the sled, the wind whipping at his sparse hair. He saw *Flower* squatting on her hilltop; and the distant water-plant, and vehicles speeding for cover as the storm came down; and airships running for the makeshift field before the storm should hit—miracle if the crews could get them secured in time. He clenched his fist in rage, foreseeing damage, ships picked up by Kesrith's winds and hurled like toys about the field—human equippage, that, expensive and irreplaceable.

He shifted onto *Flower's* wavelength and heard *Flower* giving frantic instructions. They were warning the aircraft off, seeking means to route them around the storm to temporary landing elsewhere. He watched as lightnings lit the clouds, and the clouds bred and built and rolled in with frightening rapidity, red-lit with Arain's glow.

And the dusei in unending rows sat, and watched, and maintained their vigil. The rains began to fall.

Stavros shivered as the first drops spattered the nose of the sled. It was not a place to sit encased in metal, with the lightnings flashing overhead. He backed, opened the doorway, entered the Nom and sealed the door after, still hearing *Flower's* chatter, along with weather-radar on his receptor, foretelling a bow of storm that clutched at the sea's edge, at the city itself.

Flower, he sent, breaking in on their communications. *Flower: Stavros.*

They acknowledged, a thin metallic sound, interrupted by static.

Flower: the dusei, the dusei. . . .

"We have observed, sir. We are regretfully busy—"

He broke in again. *Flower: drive off the dusei. Break them up, drive them away.*

They acknowledged the order. He sat in his sled, feeling as though he had lost his mind, as though all reason had departed him. Doubtless *Flower* believed that he had fled his senses. But the ominous heaviness in the air persisted. His skin prickled. he could not bear the dus-presence, watching, watching at the storm's edge.

Responsible?

He refused to believe it. Yet in panic he had diverted *Flower* to deal with them. He knew them to be discussing the task, too wise to discuss the wisdom of it in his hearing. He sat with his skin drawn into gooseflesh, his teeth near to chattering, a quavering and sickly old man, he thought, a man who had been among strangers too long.

He could countermand his own order, break in again and bid them tend more important matters.

But neither could he rid himself of the fear of the dusei.

His screens went all to static, robbing him of the power to communicate with anyone. The static lasted, and there came a note over his receptors that shrilled, ear-tormenting, and passed beyond audibility. He powered down, quickly, desperate, of a sudden consumed with the fear that the sled itself might be malfunctioning, himself

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trapped, helpless to move or call for help.

He watched, through a curtain of rain against the glass, the line of the dusei begin to break, the beasts scattering; and still he shivered, terrified, as he saw many of them break not toward the hills, but toward the city, entering its streets, ranging where dusei were not wont to come.

Attacking!

The static continued.

A regul voice came over the loudspeaker, distorted by static, unintelligible. The address system cut in and out sporadically. Hail rattled against the windows, shaking them dangerously. Stavros hastily tried to cut in the stormshields on the observation deck, and they did not operate. He thought to put the sled on battery, and thereby obtained responses from it, but his screens were still dead. Somewhere there was a crash, a heavy impact of falling plastiglass; and wind and the smell of rain went through the Nom halls.

Stavros backed the sled, tried to engage the track and fouled the order sequence, began again.

It took. He guided himself out of the area and around the corner, finding the hall a wreckage, unshielded windows lying on the carpet at the end of the area, curtains whipping loose from their bases. Regul younglings cowered together.

Deprived of the screen, he could not communicate with them. They closed about him, babbling questions, seeking any elder, even human, that could advise them. He pushed the sled through them and sought the downramp, the safer side of the building where the offices were. The hall here was clear. The public address continued to sputter.

He found Hulagh's offices open, navigated his way with difficulty, and found the bai himself frantically attempting the closure of the stormshields.

A dus was outside. It reared itself against the thin plastiglass. The glass bowed, shook under the raking impact of the claws.

Hulagh backed his sled, fingering controls desperately; and Stavros sat still, watching the attack in horror. There was not a door in the Nom that would operate, nothing they could do should the beasts break in. The windows quivered.

"Gun!" he cried at Hulagh, trying to make himself understood aloud. "Gun!"

And he backed, and Hulagh either understood or reached the same conclusion. They moved, as rapidly as the sleds would allow, and Hulagh rounded the desk and sought a pistol, holding it in shaking hands.

But the dus had retreated, a shambling brown shape quickly lost in the sheeting rain across the square.

There were others, vague brown shapes that gathered and moved, milling nervously; and then slowly, as though they had forgotten what they were about, they disappeared into the streets of the city, and were gone.

In time the rain slacked, leaving only pocked puddles, and the stormshields suddenly operated all at once, too late for protection.

The public address became clear, pouring forth a constant chatter of

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instructions. Stavros' screens sorted themselves into clarity.

"Stavros, Stavros, do you read?"

Clear, he sent, *all clear;* and cut them off, for of a sudden there was a grayness before his eyes and he was content only to stay still, to breathe, to wait until the labored beating of his heart and the roaring in his ears subsided.

There is a window out on the second floor, Stavros advised Hulagh. *Injuries there, I think.*

"Younglings will attend to it."

They neither one mentioned the dus. *Flower* was still trying to advise him of what its operations were doing. He heard them talking to the aircraft that had drawn off in advance of the storm, shepherding their lost searchers home again to the city.

And one of the aircraft answering, the rough-accented voice of Hada Surag-gi: "Favor, favor, seeking return to mission, *Flower*-bai, seeking return to search."

And a human voice, also from an aircraft, cursing and demanding an explanation of the jamming.

Stavros wiped his face, cut off the chatter, and looked at the bai.

"Never in my experience," said the bai. "Never, reverence."

And Hulagh jabbed at buttons and summoned a youngling servitor, ordering soi, and records; and cursed the slowness of youngling wits. His breathing was at an alarming rate. It was several moments before he seemed in control of himself.

"They have all gone mad," he said.

Their world, advised Stavros. *Theirs, before the mri.*

The soi arrived, borne by a youngling so agitated that the cups danced on the tray; and Stavros drank his unsweetened and drew the welcome warmth into his chilled belly.

At length he had the courage to touch the controls to open the stormshields again, remembering the beast even as he did so; and the square was deserted. Of a surety no regul and no humans would venture out until it was known where the dusei had gone.

He felt that he would see the apparition that had attacked the window in his nightmares thereafter; if the regul were prone to bad dreams, the bai would share it.

"I am very old," said Hulagh in a querulous tone. "I am too old for such things, bai Stavros. The regul who took this world were mad." He sipped at his soi. "The mri controlled them. Now nothing does."

There can be barriers, Stavros keyed. *We can build them.*

Hulagh was silent for a long time, throughout most of the cup of soi. His nostrils worked rapidly. At last he blew a sigh and turned his sled from the window.

"Holn," he said.

Reverence?

"Holn concealed records. I did not ask, and they did not say, and I know now." Nostrils worked in great flaring breaths of air. "Stavros-bai, you and I have failed to ask questions. Now, now you and I, Stavros-bai, we have been handed only fragments of what we should have known about Kesrith. We are together in difficulty; and

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we share an enemy, Stavros-bai."

Holn.

"Holn," said Hulagh. "They were clever, human reverence; and I shall not be able to face the anger of my doch if I return destitute. Ship, equipment, everything, reverence Stavros. I am ruined. But likewise Holn has cheated you."

Bai Hulagh, you have a purpose in volunteering this information.

"The fortunes of doch Alagn," said Hulagh, "are here, with myself, with these surviving younglings. I will not be sent back in disgrace on a human ship. We shall deal, Stavros."

An alliance, reverence?

"An alliance, bai Stavros. Trade. Exchange. Ideas. And revenge."

Stavros met the dark, glittering eyes. *From Kesrith,* he sent, *there are territories to be explored.*

"It is first necessary," said Hulagh, "to hold Kesrith."

As the Holn and the mri held it, advised Stavros, *with its resources used. Even the dusei. Even them.*

And he fell to staring out the window, at the roiling sky, and saw the ruin of the port, and the rain, and considered the resources with which they had to work; and for the first time his hopes began to hold a taint of doubt.

When he shut his eyes, he still saw the beast at the window, irrational, as uncontrollable as the elements; he hated them, the dusei, the more so perhaps because they were without rationality, because they were, like the storm, of the elemental forces.

Antipathy to all that was regul and Kiluwan, the dusei.

But they were a part of Kesrith that could neither be ignored nor destroyed.

A combination of random elements, the world of Kesrith; and hereafter, he foresaw, it was not under the control of George Stavros. He could no longer control. He shared Kesrith with beasts and with regul.

He clenched his hand on controls and listened to *Flower* again, hearing the babble of search-craft that were bound out yet another time on their continuing patterns, trying to find one lost soul in all that wilderness, where dusei ran wild and storms raked the land with violence.

Almost he bade them give it up.

But he had already given *Flower* irrational orders enough. He did not make the move. He saw one of the aircraft circle far out over the ruins of the edun and continue west, a speck quickly lost in the haze.

XXIII

Melein was asleep, finally. Niun, wiping the weariness from his eyes, settled the heavy metal ovoid into his lap and leaned his head back against the warm, breathing side of the dus.

Duncan lay sprawled in the sand, on his stomach, his tattered and makeshift robes inadequate to afford him much protection from scrapes and sand-sores. His skin, bare above the boots, was scored with abrasions and sunburn. His eyes, unprotected by the veil, without the membrane to ease them, ran tears that streaked a perpetual coating of dust, like a dus gone *miuk.*

Duncan was exhausted for the

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moment, beyond causing them any trouble. Niun noted that a jo had settled against the rock, its luin-camouflage a little too dark for the red sandstone, where it clung for shade in this hottest part of the day. The name meant mimic. The creature harmed nothing. It waited for snakes, which were its natural food. It was not a bad campmate, the jo.

Niun nodded over his charge, his arms clasped about it, and rested his head, and finally relaxed enough to sleep a while, now that Melein had settled. She had almost fainted before they stopped in this shelter, overburdened and hurting more than she wanted to admit. She had gone aside from them, into the privacy of the rocks, and taken cloth with her, in long strips.

"I think it will help my side," she had said; and because there was no kath'en or kel'e'en to attend her, she attended to herself. The ribs were broken, he much feared, or at the least cracked. He was worried, with a deep, cold fear that would not leave him.

But she had returned, hand pressed to her side, and smiled a thin smile and announced that she felt some better, and that she thought she could sleep; and the tension unwound from Niun's vitals when he saw that she could do so, that her pain was less.

But the fear did not go away.

He bore Duncan's presence, his dread of anything that Duncan might do to him far less than his fear for Melein, his fear for losing her, for ending alone.

The last mri.

He dreamed of the edun, and its towers crumbling in fire, and awoke clutching the smooth shape of the Pan'en to him in the fear that he also was falling into the Dark.

But he sat on the sand, the dus unmoving behind him. The jo, with a deft swoop, descended on a lizard and bore it back to his upside-down perch on the rock, shrouding his meal with his mottled wings, a busy and tiny movement as he fed, swallowing the lizard bit by bit.

Niun set the Pan'en beside him so that he could feel it, constantly, against himself, and leaned his head against the dus. He drowsed again, and awoke finding the heat unpleasant. He looked toward the advancing line of the sunlight, that had crept up on Duncan, and saw that it had enveloped him to the waist, falling on the bare skin of his knee and hand. The human did not stir.

"Duncan," said Niun. He obtained no reaction, and reluctantly bestirred himself, leaned forward and shook at the human. "Duncan."

Brown eyes stared up at him, bewildered, heat-dazed.

"The sun, stupid tsi'mri, the sun. Move into the shade."

Duncan dragged himself into a new place and collapsed again, ripped aside the veil and lay with the cooler sand against his bare face. His eyes blinked, returning sensibility within them, as Niun resumed his place.

"Are we ready to move on?" he asked in a faint voice.

"No. Sleep."

Duncan lifted his head and looked around at Melein, lay down again facing Niun.

"Somewhere," he said in a faint whisper, "my people will have

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come to Kesrith by now. She needs medical help. You know that. If it were sure that those up there are humans, we could contact an aircraft. Listen: The war is over. I don't think you know us well enough to believe it, but we wouldn't pursue matters any further. No revenge. No war. Come in with me. Contact my people. There would be help for her. And no retaliations. None."

Niun listened to the words, patient, believing at least that Duncan believed what he was saying.

"Perhaps it is even true," he said. "But she would never accept this."

"She will die. But with help—"

"We are mri. We do not accept others' medicines, only our own. She has done what can be done under our own ways. Should strangers touch her? No. We live or we die, we heal or we do not heal." He shrugged. "Maybe our way of doing things is not even a wise one. Sometimes I have thought it was not. But we are the very last, and we will keep to the things that all our ancestors before us have observed. There is no use now for anything but that."

And he fell to thinking how Melein had planned, and that they had won this last small victory over tsi'mri, that they had gathered to themselves the Holiness and the history of their kind; and his fingers ran over the smooth skin of the Pan'en that he kept by him

"I have broken two traditions," he admitted at last. "I have taken you, and I have carried burdens. But the honor of the she'pan I will not compromise. No. I do not believe in your doctors. And I do not believe in your people and your ways. They are not for us."

Duncan looked at him, long and soberly. "Even to survive?"

"Even to survive."

"If I get back to my own people," said Duncan finally, "I'm going to make sure it's known what the regul did, what really happened that night at the port. I don't know whether it will do any good; I know it can't change anything for the better. But it ought to be told."

Niun inclined his head, a respect for that gesture. "The regul," he said, "would see you dead before they would let you tell those things. And if you hope on that account that I will let you leave our company and go to them, I must tell you I will not."

"You don't believe me."

"I don't believe you know what they will do, either your kind or the regul."

Duncan was silent thereafter, staring into nothing. He looked very worn and very tired. He rubbed at a line of dried blood that had settled into an unshaven trail; and he was quiet, but seemed not apt to sleep.

"Don't run again," Niun advised him, for he misliked the human's mood. "Don't try. I have made you too easy with us. Do not trust it."

Brown eyes flicked up at him, tsi'mri and disturbing. Duncan gathered himself up to a sitting position, moving as though every muscle ached, and rubbed his head with a grimace of discomfort.

"I had rather stay alive," he said, "like you would."

The words stung. They were too nearly true. "That is not all that

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matters," Niun said.

"I know that," Duncan said. "A truce. A truce: a peace between us at least until you've got her to somewhere safe, until she's well. I know you'd kill for her; I know that under other circumstances you might not. I understand that whatever she is, she's someone very special. . .to you."

"A she'pan," said Niun, "is Mother to a House. She is the last. A kel'en is only the instrument of her decisions. I can make no promises except for my own choice."

"Can there not be another generation?" Duncan asked suddenly, in his innocence, and Niun felt the embarrassment, but he did not take offense. "Can you not. . .if things were otherwise. . . ?"

"We are bloodkin, and her caste does not mate," Niun answered softly, moved to explain what mri had never explained to outsiders; but it was simply kel-lore, and it was not forbidden to say. It lent him courage, to affirm again the things that had always been fixed and true. "Kath'en or kel'e'en could bear me children for her, but there are none. There is no other way for us. We either survive as we were, or we have failed to survive. We are mri; and that is more than the name of a species, Duncan. It is an old, old way. It is our way. And we will not change."

"I will not be the cause," said Duncan, "of finishing the regul's handiwork. I'll stay with you. I made my try. Maybe again, sometime, maybe, but not to anyone's hurt, hers or yours. I have time. I have all the time in the world."

"And we do not," said Niun.

He thought with a wrench of fear that Duncan, wiser than he in some things, for human kel'ein were able to cross castes, suspected that Melein would not live; and it answered a fear in his own heart. He looked to see how she was resting; and she was still asleep. The sight of her regular breathing silently reassured him.

"With time and quiet," said Duncan, "perhaps she will mend."

"I accept your truce," said Niun, and in great weariness he unfastened his veil and looped the end of the *mez* over his shoulder, baring his face to the human. It was hard, shaming, to do; he had never shown his face to any tsi'mri; but he had taken this for an ally, even for the moment, and in the rightness of things, Duncan deserved to see him as he was.

Duncan looked long at him, until the embarrassment became acute and Niun flinched from that stare.

"The *mez* is a necessity in the heat and the dryness," Niun said. "But I am not ashamed to see your face. The *mez* is not necessary between us."

And he curled himself against the Pan'en, and against the solid softness of the dus, and attempted to rest, taking what ease he could, for they would move with the coolness and concealment of evening, at a time when surely regul trusted that even a mri would not dare the cliffs.

* * *

There was the sound of an aircraft, distant, a reminder of alien presence in the environs of

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Sil'athen. Niun heard it, and gathered himself up to listen, to be sure how close or how far it was. Melein was awake, and Duncan stirred, seeking at once the direction of the sound.

It was evening. The pillars had turned red, burning in the twilight. Arain was visible through their spaces, a baleful red disc, rippling in the heat of the sands.

Melein sought to rise. Niun quickly offered her his hands and helped her, and she was no longer too proud to accept that help. He looked at her drawn face and thought of his own necessary burden. His helplessness to do anything for her overwhelmed him.

"We must be moving," she said. "We must go down again, to Sil'athen. There is no other exit I know from this place. But with the aircraft—" Her face contracted in an expression of anger, of frustration. "They are watching Sil'athen. They believe that the place hides us, and if they have men afoot—"

"I hope they are afoot," said Niun. "That would give me satisfaction."

And then he remembered Duncan, and was glad that he had been speaking in the *mu'ara*, as she had used with him. But it was likely enough that they were regul that they had to deal with, who would not go afoot.

"The climb down," she said ". . .I think it would be best to move just at the last light, so that we can see to climb. There will not be a moon up until sometime later. That will give us some dark in which to cross the open place at the beginning."

"That is the best we can do," Niun agreed. "We will eat and drink before we go. We may not have another chance to stop."

And what that journey would cost Melein weighed heavily on his mind.

"Duncan," he said quietly, while they shared food, both of them unveiled, "I will not be able to do more than carry what I must carry. On the climb—"

"I will help her," Duncan said.

"Down is easier," Melein said, and looked askance at Duncan, as though she found their arrangement far from her liking.

It was the last of the food that they had brought with them. Thereafter they must hunt, and quickly they must find water again, in this place where luin were not frequent.

Niun's mind raced ahead to these things, difficulties upon difficulties, but ones more pleasant than those most immediate.

They set out again toward the trail they had used, and when they stood finally looking down that great chasm, dim and unreal in the faded light, shading into black at the bottom, he held the Pan'en close to him and dreaded the climb even for himself. When he considered Melein, he turned cold.

If she falls, he thought to warn Duncan; but it would do no good, to dishonor what small trust there was between them, and he thought that the human must know his mind. Duncan returned that stare, plain and accepting the charge that was set upon him.

"Go first," Niun bade him, and the human looped the trailing *mez*

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across his face and secured it firmly as Niun had already done with his own. Then he set his feet on the downslope, bracing them carefully, offering his hand up for Melein's.

"Niun," Melein said, a glance, a patent distress. It was the only thing at which she had shown fear, committing herself to the hands of a human, when she was already in much pain.

Then, her hand pressed to her side, she reached her fingers toward Duncan's, and carefully, carefully, she set her feet on the downslope, beginning the descent with Duncan's hand to steady her, he bracing his body against whatever security there was, his arm extended to give her a firm support should she slip. Thus in small stages they descended; and Niun stood with the Pan'en a cold and comfortless weight in his arms, watching while they disappeared together into that shadow.

The dusei waited behind him, shifting weight nervously.

And then something intruded on his hearing, from behind him.

Aircraft, skimming close above the pillars.

He grasped the carrying-bar of the Pan'en, the only way to carry it in the descent, and hissed to the dusei and started down, terrified lest he cause them to be seen, lest in his haste now he slip and come down on Melein and Duncan.

The aircraft passed directly overhead, a roar of power that echoed off the narrow walls, and he crouched low against a rock, shuddering against the strain of holding position on that slope. Pebbles skidded underneath his outmost foot. He took the chance, as the aircraft passed beyond view, and slid a few lengths lower, deeper into the shadow, and the great bodies of the dusei came behind, sharing his fear, communicating back to him an anxiety that made his stomach heave.

Niun began to think he could not hold the Pan'en: His fingers felt cut to the bone; and after he had gone a distance more, he could not feel much pain, only an increasing numbness and lack of control over his fingers. He braced himself against a rock and shifted hands, reversing his entire position on the cliffside, showered from above by pebbles and dust from the claws of the dusei. They were at such a place now that they could not stop, and he plunged down a desperate slide, until he entered the deepest dark.

And at a stopping place he overtook Melein and Duncan, and the human's face looked toward him in that faintest of light. Melein still held to his hand, bent for a moment against a boulder.

She moved on then, weakly, leaning much on Duncan; and Niun took the stable place they had had, braced his body against the weight he held, and waited, to stop the dusei, to hold them there, awkward as it was, until she was safely down. They came, shouldered against him, and he held them with a quiet will, an intense willing, that they be still, hush, stop. They were patient, even in this awkward state, joined with his senses.

The aircraft passed again, lights winking against the dim sky overhead. Niun looked up at it, trem-

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bling with the strain, and held his place, helpless, with the growing conviction that they were lost.

They had surely been spotted, at the worst of all times, in the worst of all places.

The ship circled yet once more.

He settled the Pan'en in the right hand again and set out downward, hoping, desperately hoping, that Melein and Duncan had had time, for there were no more resting places that he remembered. He went, boots sliding on the trail, bringing up against one and another rock with a force that his muscles were too tired to absorb. He came down and down until he could scarcely control his descent, and dropped from the last turn to the sand, driven to one knee by the impact.

The dusei came after, clambering down with much scratching of claws and scattering of sand, until safe at the bottom.

And Melein sat, a pale huddle of robes in the shadow, and Duncan knelt by her. Her hand was pressed to her lips, and the other hand to her side, and her robes were stained with blood.

Niun fell to his knees beside her, the Pan'en in his arms, and she could not prevent the cough that she staunched with her veil. Blood came. He saw it, and the membrane flashed across his vision, blinding him. He shivered, unable to see for a moment, and then it cleared.

"It began on the climb," Duncan said. "I think the ribs gave way."

And the aircraft circled at the top of the cleft.

Niun looked up at it in a heat of rage.

"Be free of us," he bade Duncan, and rose up, letting the Pan'en fall to the sand. He looked last at Melein, her eyes closed, her face relaxed, her body supported in Duncan's arms—not even a sen'en to attend her.

He gave a sharp call to his dusei and began to walk, quickly, toward the end of the small valley, toward the main valley of Sil'athen.

"Niun!" Duncan shouted after him, which he did not regard.

He saw the aircraft hovering, at the valley's end. He reached for the cords at the end of the *siga's* long sleeves, and fastened them to their places on the honor belts at his shoulders, freeing his arms from the encumbering cloth; and he worked life into his hands, scored and numbed as they were from carrying the Pan'en.

Duncan was running now, trying to overtake him. He heard the human—a racking cough, immediate payment for that rashness in Kesrith's thin air. He saw the aircraft touch on the sand, and regul descending, standing on the ramp. The dus at his side moaned a roar of menace, and the other two scattered out, flanking them—dus-tactics in hunting, the outrunners.

He saw the regul about to fire, the weapon lifted. He was not in its line when it discharged; but his eyes were clear and his hand steady when he fired; and the regul crumpled, a mass of flesh still stirring. They did not die easily, body-shot. A moment later the ramp drew up, toppling the wounded regul; *coward,* Niun cursed the regul flier.

And he darted into the rocks and scrambled for cover as the ship

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lifted, swinging over near him, drawing off again. He was in the open now, in the main valley, and other aircraft came to hover.

They would have him, eventually. He ran low among the rocks that bordered the open sands, pursued by the aircraft with their sensors, and finally, a desperate tactic, braced and fired against the nearest—all without effect for the first several shots. Then the aircraft began to have difficulty, and skidded off into a great cloud of sand amid the valley.

Others swooped in. The sky was alive with the sound of them; they passed low and drew off, warned by the fate of the first.

He ran and he rested, and by now the air was tinged with the coppery taste of too much exertion in the thin air, and he could not see clearly to fire back at them. Shots tore up the rocks where he hid, and he staggered as rock became shrapnel and tore his arm, bringing a warm rivulet of blood.

Lights played across the cliffs, making it impossible to remain hidden. There was scant cover, and shots tore at what there was of it. He ran, and fell, and scrambled up and raced for the next rock, and what had become of the dusei he did not know—it was not their kind of fight, this fury of fire and light.

The valley became ruin, steles and natural formations blasted to rubble. It was the final vengeance of the regul on his kind, to destroy the last sanctity of the People; and to ruin the land, as they had destroyed all that they had touched.

A near miss threw him rolling, dazed, blinded by the membrane that shielded his eyes, and he rose up and ran, too harried to fire any longer, able only to run and run, until they had him a clear target.

An aircraft pressed at him, diving low, throwing sand from the wind of its passing. And then he thought with a sudden and clear satisfaction, and shifted left, toward the end of the valley, toward an old, old place, under the sightless eyes of Eddan and Liran and Debas, his teachers.

Fight with the land; make it your ally, they had been wont to tell him; and now he heard them clear and calmly through the roar of the aircraft.

He fell, sprawling, and the aircraft continued on over him, hovered, kicking up sand; and he lay still, still as it settled, playing lights over the sand where he lay.

It touched; and the earth exploded, a great pale shape rearing up, heaving the aircraft, catching the ship in the convulstions of the mantle: burrower and machine, entangled in a cloud of sand, and the concussions of the struggle shaking the earth.

Niun rolled and tried to run, but an edge of the mantle or a shock of air hurled him sprawling, and then another impact, and he saw the world go up in fire as the aircraft disintegrated.

And dark thereafter.

* * *

"Niun!"

Someone was calling him out of that dark, that had not the familiarity of the brothers; but it was a familiar voice, all the same.

Light broke over him. He moved

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limbs that were buried in sand, and heard the sound of engines.

"Niun!"

He lifted his head and then drew himself up, standing on legs that swayed beneath him, shielding his eyes from the light with his arm.

Waiting.

"Niun!" It was Duncan's voice, from a ragged silhouette before the lights. "Don't fire. Niun, we have Melein aboard. She is not dead, Niun."

He went blank at that horrid shock, his mind not functioning, and came near to falling. And then the kel-law echoed far in his mind, reminding him that there was a she'pan to be served; and that, above all else, he could not leave her alone in the hands of strangers.

"What do you want of me?" he cried, his voice breaking with fury, with rage at Duncan, and treachery, and dishonor. "Duncan, I remind you what you swore—"

"Come in," Duncan said. "Niun, come in with us. Safe conduct. I will swear it."

He hesitated, and the strength went out of him, and he made a gesture of surrender, and began, slowly, to walk into the lights, toward the silhouettes that waited for him, tall and human.

Better than the regul, at least.

And out of the tail of his eye, a squat, dark form. He saw it, saw the move, knew treachery.

He palmed the *as'ei,* whirled and threw; and the fire took him, and he never felt the sand.

* * *

"Hada Surag-gi is dead," said Galey. "The mri are hanging on."

Duncan wiped his face, and in the same gesture swept the headcloth off, and ran his fingers through his sweat-soaked hair. He stumbled back through the narrow confines of the aircraft and shouldered past the medic who had already twice ordered him to keep his seat.

He sat down on the deck, unsteady in the motion of the aircraft, and regarded the two mri, wrapped in white, a tangle of tubing and monitoring connections from the auto-med units keeping their lives by means that the mri would find distasteful, had they known it.

But they would have the chance to know it.

"They're going to make it, both of them," the medic said. And then, frowning, with a glance at the sheet-wrapped hulk to the rear: "That particular regul was an officer of the Nom, with connections. There are going to be some questions asked."

"There will be some questions asked," Duncan said in a still voice, and looked at the mri, dismissing the medic from his mind. He sat with his legs tucked under him, still in the tattered and makeshift robes, and with his mind elsewhere; and at last the medic drew off to talk to the crew.

They had spoken little to him after the first excitement of recovering him alive; they were put off, perhaps, by the look of him, the strangeness of a man who had come alive from the desert of Kesrith, keeping company with mri and insisting with such vehemence on the

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possession of a mri treasure.

He touched Melein's brow, smoothed the metallic-bronze of her hair, noting the steady pulse on the monitors that assured him of her life. Melein's golden eyes opened, the membrane cleared slowly back, and she seemed to be exploring the curious place that she had seen in her intervals of waking, rediscovering the strangeness that had taken her in. She was curiously calm, as though in compliance with being. He took her long, slim fingers in his hand, and she pressed his hand with a faint response.

"Niun is all right," he told her. He was not sure she understood this, for there was not a flicker. "There is the object you wanted," he added, but she did not look; likely all these concerns were distant from her, for she was heavily drugged.

"Kel'en," she whispered.

"She'pan?" he answered; perhaps she confused him with Niun.

"There will be a ship," she said. "A way off Kesrith."

"There will be that," he said to her, and reckoned that he had told her the truth. She closed her eyes then.

"Shon'ai," she said, with a taut, faint smile. He did not know the word. But he thought that she meant acceptance.

The deck slanted. They were coming in. He told her so. ★

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A tall tale of Toltecs and time travel

I STOPPED BY Doctor Ari's place the other morning before going to work, partly to kill some time, partly to quell an uncharacteristic case of nerves I was developing.

Doctor Ari is a good man to see whenever I get the jitters; his medicine might be three thousand years out of date but he has a bedside manner that can calm anybody. It's the main reason he's still a doctor, not a waiter somewhere else.

The little bell over the door tinkled when I entered the storefront office and Doctor Ari's deep, heavily accented voice sounded from the back room.

"Chust a minute, I god a nother patient."

A few minutes later a seedy-looking old lady preceded him out of the curtained door, clutching a bottle of pills and thanking him profusely in Greek. The Doctor smiled benignly and repeated some instructions about dosage; then, after she had left, he turned to me with a broad grin.

"Scharles! Long time no see. You come back here, we have some Ouzo, yes?"

I nodded, feeling better already, and followed him into the examination room.

Doctor Ari is a tall, distinguished-looking old quack with the kind of hawk-face you see so often among the ancient Attics. It isn't hard to see how he came to end up here, three millenia from home, because of a stupid mistake.

Back when Human Resources Inc., was just starting up, they had for chief time-jumper one Ed Benchley, as dull a clod as ever held the job. I think he finally ended up a tech out on Mars or some such place, and good riddance. Doctor Ari was the reason he left HRI, in fact. It seems that some Ivy-League college decided they wanted Aristotle—the real Aristotle—for the head of their philosophy department, and HRI sent Benchley after him. Not only was Benchley a dope, but he had specialized in Northern Europe and consequently his Attic was limited to a handful of phrases and gestures.

Well, they sent him back to Athens and when he asked around for Aristotle in broken Greek, he was directed to Doctor Ari's house. This was, of course, prior to the snatch laws and so as soon as he saw this distinguished and intelligent-looking man and determined that his name was indeed Aristotle, he hit him with a sleeper and jumped. The clod!—it never occurred to him that Aristotle was a common name in Athens. The man he snatched turned out to be the neighborhood doctor.

The college and HRI were justifiably put out by the waste of nearly one-half million dollars, not to mention the presence of an unwanted snatchee, and so Benchley got his walking papers. Even then Doctor Ari could have sued but it turned out that he didn't mind the situation at all once everything was explained to him. He settled right in, got a

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naturopathic license and started doing a land-office business. All things considered, Benchley didn't do too bad a job; I've met the real Aristotle several times and compared to him, Doctor Ari is a prize.

Now it's hard to believe the Doctor is so far out of time; his only anachronism is his insistence upon wearing sandals, which he claims are good for the feet. Judging by observation of the neighborhood, he has persuaded quite a few of his patients to take them up as well.

I sat down on an examination table while he rummaged behind a shelf of neatly labeled herbs and came up with a half-full bottle of Ouzo. He poured out most of it into two beakers and handed me one with a flourish.

"Hoo! Dot's good stuff!" he said after a long drink. "Better than we got at home, you bet. Dot's medicine!"

I drank mine more cautiously, savoring the fire in my throat.

"So, Scharles," he said after a minute, "what's bringing you here this time of day? You tink maybe you need a physic?"

I shuddered. "No, thanks, just some talk."

He finished his Ouzo and leaned back, his bedside manner showing. "Talk, eh? You have the hard one coming up, dot's it, yes?"

"Yes," I said, nodding. "I have a hard one today. It's giving me the jitters."

"Dot's good. You fellas get too damn cocky sometime. You make stupid back there. Pretty soon—" he snapped his fingers, "no more Scharles. You get jitters, you maybe be more careful."

"Yes, well, I'll have to play this one real carefully. It's a killer." Doctor Ari didn't say anything, just nodded gravely, so I continued. "I don't know if you've ever heard of the Toltecs. They were a big Mexican civilization up until about a thousand years ago when they moved south, or were pushed south by the Aztecs. Anyway, they had a religious teacher called Quetzalcoatl who showed up sometime around the sixth century A.D., inspired them to become really great, humanized them somewhat and generally changed the course of pre-Columbian history." I paused to take another drink.

"Apparently there's been a theory knocking around for a long time that this Quetzalcoatl was actually an early Irish missionary named Saint Brendan, and now something called the Auld Sod Historical Fund wants him snatched for the greater glory of modern Ireland. I've got the job."

Doctor Ari meditated for a moment. "So what is so bad, Scharles? You're the best there is, sounds like a piece of pie."

"That's cake, piece of cake. But it isn't by any means. You see," I began ticking points off on my fingers, "we don't know for sure that Quetzalcoatl ever really existed; if he did, we don't know if he was really Brendan; and if he was, we still are guessing about the time involved since several of the big Toltec rulers after him called themselves Quetzalcoatl as well, with resulting vast confusion. We don't even know for sure where he lived, again because of later confusion of names."

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Doctor Ari started to say something but I held up my hand. "I know," I said, "those are pretty standard problems, but there's more. Unlike most ancient civilizations, relatively little is known about Toltec language and customs and so I'll be operating half in the dark. For instance, at that state of their development did they go in big for human sacrifice like the later Aztecs did? Were they as severely xenophobic as some Mesoamericans? Were they loaded down with taboos? I'm going to have to be very careful about things like that. And, assuming I do find Brendan, how am I supposed to get him to sign up? He was probably a misfit at home, certainly hyper-religious. . . ."

I let the sentence trail off. I was scaring myself.

As I had hoped, Doctor Ari wasn't at all sympathetic. "Well, Scharles," he said bluntly, "dot's your job. You want to quit, you quit. Take nice safe desk job, dot what you want to do? You do it, nobody stoppin' you."

"Damn it, that's not what I meant. I just wish—"

And suddenly I smiled; my jitters were gone. As usual, Doctor Ari—with his brusque, stolid manner—had channeled my thoughts in the right direction. After all, I reflected, I had taken the job of jumper for adventure. Now I was going to get some, wasn't that the point? Sure, it would be a challenge.

I thought about my last job, snatching Isaac Newton for the umpteenth time; what a bore. With somebody as popular—and thereby well-researched—as he was, you just followed the book, showed him some pages from the *Journal of Mathematics*, August, 2173, and then gave him a pen to sign the contract with. In Brendan's case I would have to think for a change, and that might turn out to be fun.

With a grin I stood up and shook Doctor Ari's hand. "Thanks, Doc. You've fixed me up again."

He chuckled. "You done the fixing, Scharles. All I do is maybe give you a liddle help. You go get dot Kwettywhoever and bring him round here, I fix him up some physic."

I turned down an offer of some more Ouzo—this was no time to get drunk—and walked out of Doctor Ari's office a new man. By the time I pushed open the wide glass doors of the HRI building, I was actively looking forward to the jump.

McNaulty, head of Operations, was waiting for me in his office, gnawing on the end of an unlit cigar. It's a standard joke among HRI jumpers that we don't have to worry, McNaulty does enough of that for everybody. Whether it's out of concern for us or for the huge costs of operation, it's left up to personal opinion.

This time he seemed to be working on an ulcer. "Hayward!" He groaned with relief, "Thank God! I thought you weren't going to show up this morning. (I was all of ten minutes late.) The boys in Prep have called six times."

"They ought to learn patience, it's a great virtue. I got held up, but I'm rarin' to go."

McNaulty looked at me dourly. "I wish I had your confidence,

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going into this one. I don't like it."

"Piece of pie," I said casually.

He seemed not have heard. "Willis is all set with the briefing and Make-Up will be ready by noon. You're sure the language took?"

I said, "No problem," in Nahuatl and two Gaelic dialects.

After two weeks of intensive hypno-cramming, I was as confident as anyone can be with a dead language. McNaulty sighed and pushed a thin folder across the desk.

"Here's the contract, a map and some things Psych thinks might be useful. You can run through them during the briefing."

I shuffled through the papers and held up several sheets of parchment bearing fancy Latin script.

"Those are faked church documents to show Brendan," he explained.

"Tsk-tsk, treading awful close to coercion, aren't we?"

"Damn it! How else do you convince a sixth-century monk that you aren't a demon? The idea is to let him think the church needs him for a very special job, carrying the word to thousands and thousands of souls; if he doesn't catch on that it's in the future, that's his hard luck. Bates tells me it will hold up in court, if it comes to that. Anyway, don't you worry about legal details. Just get this mark on that contract and jump back here."

I slipped the folder under my arm and headed for the door. "See you in the jumproom, Chief—if you don't have a breakdown," I called over my shoulder. McNaulty just growled at me as I left; he takes his worrying seriously.

On the elevator I glanced through the folder again, skimmed the standard contract—written thoughtfully in Latin: "I do hereby freely and without coercion agree to accept residence in such a time and place as I have been informed of in regards to—"

If I could get Brendan to sign that without denouncing me as a devil's messenger, I would be doing something.

The map was more helpful. It showed a sparse system of roads superimposed on the topography of Mexico, with little dots indicating the location of Toltec communities. Most of the roads seemed to converge on the largest dot: Teotihuacan, the great temple city, my tentative goal.

Briefings are generally dull things and the one that day was no exception. I was quizzed on the language and such customs and taboos as we had learned of through our sketchy—but cheap—autoscanning equipment, and lectured briefly on the fragmentary and often contradictory traditions concerning Saint Brendan and Quetzalcoatl. It all seemed pretty weak evidence to base a jump on.

After that a technician gave me a painful series of shots while Willis read me a long list of completely obvious dos and don'ts, finally winding up with the most important thing of all: my time limit.

"You're lucky in one thing," he said encouragingly. "Since the Toltec civilization is a dead-end, you have quite a bit of temporal leeway, as much as a week if you watch your step—and I do mean watch it! This isn't your ordinary jump. Stay away from people as much as pos-

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sible, get Brendan fast and clean, and don't stop for sightseeing. Play it safe and you shouldn't have any problem with time."

I leaned back and considered that. A week is a long time for an operation, far longer than usual, and it made up for a lot. One of the biggest problems with jumping—hell, *the* biggest problem—is the temporal limit, the maximum time you have in which to find your man and bring him back . . . or else stay there for good.

When time-jumping was first discovered back in the nineteen-thirties, everyone worried about paradoxes and possible changes in the present. It didn't take long, however, to find that the present is safe from alteration thanks to the phenomenon of historical point-deviation, a concise phrase meaning that any change brought about in the past by a jumper starts a whole new course of history completely and permanently unreachable from our own.

Thus, if I were to go back and shoot Hitler in Vienna (and it has been tried), there would be no change in the present. WWII would still be in our history books but there would be another present created where things were vastly different. The unfortunate catch is that I would then be stranded in that time-track for the rest of my life since its future would become mine. Back home I would fail to return, and that would be the only effect.

Not only does historical point-deviation come into play with any overt attempt to change the past, but even the most innocuous jump has minor effects that are cumulatively enough to bring a new line into existence. So everything the jumper does is potentially dangerous, from taking a drink of water to swatting a mosquito; just the fact of his being there, even if he stands motionless, will eventually produce enough change to strand him.

Fortunately for jumpers (and jump companies such as HRI), the maximum safe temporal limit can be computed so that, barring accidents and careless meddling, the jumper knows how long he has in a given operation before the cumulative changes pose a threat. Furthermore, when he snatches somebody, or makes a bad mistake, he has about four minutes in which to get away—a temporal delay, it's called. But nobody lasts too long if he counts on that; pretty soon he miscalculates and doesn't come back.

Different times and places have different temporal limits, ranging from days to minutes. Generally, but not always, the further back you go, the shorter the limit, the exceptions being dead-end times such as Toltec Mexico, where even sizeable changes will be nullified by the Aztecs and finally by the Spanish in the sixteenth century.

* * *

I usually work within a one- or two-day limit, so I wouldn't feel rushed in a week. Still more important, I could trade off time for freedom, giving me a chance to talk to people, eat if I wanted to, and worry a little less about mistakes, in exchange for a day or two of my al-

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loted time. It was a welcome advantage; I didn't want to think about being stranded in Toltec Mexico. If I ever do go over the hill, it won't be in a place like that.

The briefing over, I shook hands with Willis and went to Make-Up, where I was transformed into a typical Toltec. They glued on a beaked plastic nose, tinted my skin and did something to my head that left me with lank, oily black hair. Then they outfitted me with a costume that must have cost a small fortune in bird feathers alone. I was going as a wealthy farmer from southern Mexico, come north to see the fabled Quetzalcoatl.

I carried a sort of shoulder bag containing the folder McNaulty had given me, some shell money and my all-important snatcher: a palm-sized piece of metal which, when squeezed just so, would instantly whisk me back home, along with whomever was in bodily contact with me. It always seems an awfully insignificant gadget in which to trust my life but I guess that under a microscope its innards are enough to make an engineer dither happily.

After the lengthy briefing and costuming, it was almost three o'clock when I finally entered the jumproom. McNaulty was there along with several technicians and a man whom he identified as O'Brien, the legal rep for the Auld Sod Historical Fund. O'Brien did not look Irish; he didn't look much of anything in particular except a short, mousy man who was obviously ill at ease in the faintly humming presence of the complex jump equipment.

After introductions had been made and he had recovered from the shock of seeing me in costume, he finished what he had been saying to McNaulty when I came in.

"And are you absolutely sure that there will be no coercion of Saint Brendan?" He seemed a little uncomfortable with the title. "It would be unthinkable for my clients to be a party to anything in any way improper."

McNaulty smiled broadly and spread his hands. Lord, he can be glib! "I assure you, Mr. O'Brien, that Human Resources employs only the most ethical methods of recruitment. We have for over thirty years excelled in supplying the modern world with talent gleaned from all the past ages of man, and I think I can safely say that our long record of honorable operation speaks for itself, preceding as it does by some years the so-called anticoercion laws intended to regulate our less conscientious competitors.

"Human Resources is no fly-by-night concern, Mr. O'Brien. We have a reputation—a tradition—to uphold and none of our recruits—" I almost laughed at that. Nobody in the company ever calls them anything but snatchees—"have ever had occasion to complain of our treatment of them. Mr. Hayward here is our best operative, a man with long experience in the sort of respectful but persuasive arguments that are likely to convince such a dedicated man as Saint Brendan that his best interests will be served by coming to us."

At that point I coughed loudly. It was a fine speech, smooth from

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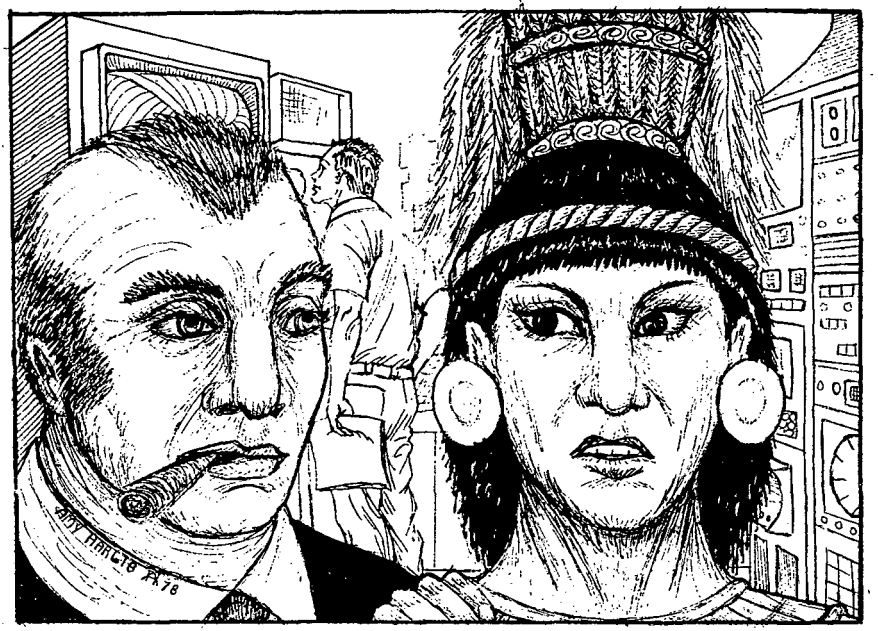

long practice in reassuring clients who suddenly realized the enormity of the undertaking—tampering with reality itself—but I had heard it all before.

McNaulty glared slightly at me. "Okay, Hayward," he barked, suddenly all efficiency, "I guess you want to get moving now."

I nodded and stepped into the red circle on the floor that marked the focus of the beam. One of the techs came over and checked my snatcher with a meter.

"All set, Mr. Hayward," he said. "We're dropping you about five miles outside of Teotihuacan, in September, five hundred fifty-six."

"I won't even ask whose hat you pulled that date out of."

He smiled thinly; techs don't like jokes about their computations. "Your snatcher's okay, one week limit, see you in—" he glanced at a clipboard he carried—"fifteen minutes' subjective time."

He returned the snatcher and stepped over to a console. McNaulty and I exchanged thumbs-up, and the beam was switched on.

It's hard for anyone who has never jumped to believe the almost total lack of sensation when the beam hits you and the forces that used to be called weak atomic punch you right through the continuum. There's a slight tingle as static charges equalize, and *poof*! . . . you're there.

* * *

I crouched down automatically, scanning the area to see if anyone

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had noticed my arrival, an event that would call for immediate return, but I was alone and slowly I straightened up.

Pre-Columbian Mexico was a dried-up, rocky place, although not as wild as I had expected. Behind me trees thickened into a sparse, thorny woods, but ahead the field—which was irrigated and planted in short, scrubby corn—stretched about a hundred yards to a narrow road with fields on the other side. Cautiously I walked out to the road and looked both ways after checking my map, which had a little x marking my point of arrival. Off to the right rose a line of high hills that seemed to be uncultivated while to the left I saw more fields, and in the distance a cluster of thatched adobe huts. I started off toward them.

It was hot walking along that trail; the sun was near the zenith and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. After a while I took off my headpiece but soon found that the sun beat down even worse without it. Little puffs of reddish dust rose with my every footstep and now and then a big black tarantula would run across the road in front of me, while out beyond the fields an incredible variety of bird life made a din in the chaparral.

As I approached the adobe huts, I saw that they were the buildings of a small, not-very-prosperous-looking farm. A couple of scrawny turkeys pecked listlessly in the dust and a nasty-looking Chihuahua yapped shrilly at me from the shade of an awning. Presently a stout Indian woman came out to see what the commotion was about. I smiled at her and asked for a drink of water.

She looked me over for a second or two and then returned a broad and almost toothless smile. "Of course, Outlander, come on in. The sun's too hot for traveling."

I had to stoop to enter the low building. Inside, all but enveloped by a cloud of flies, a filthy infant played with a gourd rattle and an old man slept noisily on a crude platform in one corner. The woman brought me a pottery jar of tepid water and, after a glance at the sleeping man, a shallow bowl of mush as well.

"Here, Outlander, fill your belly. You look like you've come from far away."

"Yes, Woman, I have come from the south for many days, bound for the holy city of Teotihuacan. How far have I yet to go?"

"Oh, not far, a half-day's travel. My! The bugs are bad this year, ain't they? My husband," she gestured at the snoring man, "won't work when they're this bad."

I agreed politely; the bugs were bad. Of course they didn't bother me; I had had a repellent shot before I left. I couldn't risk any interaction with the local insect life.

The woman did not have visitors very often, I guess. She rattled on about the weather and her good-for-nothing husband and similar mundane topics. At least it gave me a chance to practice my Nahuatl on her; if my accent and syntax were very bad, she said nothing, probably laying it to my being from the south.

I finished the mush, choking a little on the heavy chili seasoning, and got up to go.

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"You can stay the night if you want," the woman said with a casual leer. "He'll get drunk before the sun sets, and I get lonely."

"Oh, no, thank you. I have to get to the city," I said hastily, shuddering at the possibilities for historical change. "Friends are expecting me."

"Oh, trading?"

"No, a pilgrimage." She nodded, satisfied by the explanation. I decided to fish for some information. "Have you heard of the one called the Feathered Serpent?"

She sniffed. "A lot of dog's water, I've heard of him. Everyone in the city is all a-jabber about him. Just another fool of the gods, he'll grow tiresome soon enough. All the rich city-folks think he's very fine, white like a worm. I wouldn't bother with him. Now the Great Temple, that's something to see. If you're lucky, there will be a sacrifice while you're there. Oh, the priests are grand at a sacrifice! But that Quetzalcoatl. I've heard that he doesn't even go to the sacrifices. He's nothing, mark me, just a fool of the gods."

I finally got away from her and took to the road again, vowing to be more careful in the future. That was the sort of performance that would have had McNaulty gulping tranquilizers like they were jellybeans; if the husband had come to in a surly mood. . . . But after all, it had paid off. Now I knew for sure that Quetzalcoatl was near in both space and time.

It got hotter and hotter as the day wore on and my finery began to droop. I came to several crossroads and intersections and soon found that my map wasn't worth a damn since it showed only the very largest of a complex maze of roads. It wasn't hard to head for Teotihuacan by following the larger and more thickly settled trails but I had no idea of how far I had to travel, and I was beginning to worry about finding a place to sleep when I saw a cloud of dust about a half-mile ahead.

I increased my pace and before long caught up with my fellow travelers: a group of three farmers and six bearers going to market in the city. They were just preparing to make camp by the side of the road and I was glad enough to accept their offer to stop with them, even though I knew it was a risky thing to do.

As it turned out, they were all too tired to ask me many questions and after a solid meal of roast iguana and tortillas washed down with thick cocoa, everyone stretched out around the fire and promptly went to sleep.

I lay awake for a long time, listening to the unfamiliar night sounds, the occasional dreaming groans of the bearers and the snores of the farmer on my immediate right. As always, it had taken a while for the full realization of just where I was to sink in and, as always, it now hit me heavily. Here I was, over one and a half millenia from home, sleeping among good, upstanding men who would probably be all too glad to see my heart cut out if they knew who I was. It was not a comfortable train of thought but at least it kept my mind off the tarantulas I had seen earlier and the occasional rustlings in the

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underbrush nearby. Finally I drifted off.

I awoke the next morning stiff and sore from sleeping on the bare ground. One of the farmers was shaking my shoulder. "Come on, Outlander, time to move. You want to get to the city early."

We breakfasted on some fruit that hung from a nearby tree, walking as we ate.

About eight o'clock in the morning we topped a rise and looked out over the holy city of Teotihuacan. How can I describe it? I had been prepared for a sprawling town of adobe huts but what I saw instead was a huge, far-flung metropolis of brick and stone that stretched for miles in all directions, interrupted here and there by steep, man-made mountains of temples and long avenues of statues and columns.

Dwarfing everything else, straight ahead, perhaps a mile away, there rose a single pyramid so enormous that it looked like a natural formation. That would be the Temple of the Sun, later to be more-or-less given over to the worship of Quetzalcoatl. It was breathtaking.

The three farmers watched my reaction and had a good laugh at seeing my eyes widen in disbelief. "No offense, Outlander," one said, "but it's always funny to watch somebody when he sees the Holy City for the first time. It makes you feel small, doesn't it? The greatest city in the world, the greatest there ever will be."

I wouldn't have argued with him even if I could have.

Before we started down the hill, each of them made little genuflecting motions which I was careful to copy since it seemed to be some sort of ritual.

I left the farmers at the edge of the city; they had a central marketplace to go to. I wanted to wander around anyway, indulging my taste for sightseeing. Also they had reached the point of familiarity with me where they were beginning to ask questions about the south and I was getting nervous.

Up close the city was even more modern-looking than it had seemed from the hilltop. For one thing, it was laid out with the engineered precision of a lunar colony; and it was amazingly clean although somewhat pervaded with a cloying odor of flowers and overripe fruit. But I soon got used to that, as I did to the ever-present scurrying lizards and the grotesque carvings that decorated most of the buildings.

Less easily ignored was the cacophony of the teeming market, the gangs of naked, shrieking children playing ball and the packs of barking dogs that roamed through the streets. But it was urban in every sense of the word, even down to its peripheral slums, and it depressed me to think of its not-so-distant abandonment and ruin.

I ambled around for hours, getting the feel of the place, just enjoying myself, while drifting gradually toward the great central temple. Teotihuacan would have made a fine tourist trap; even in the slums tropical color burst forth everywhere, in the hundreds of flower stalls, blossoming trees and tame birds, not to mention the buildings themselves, most of which were brightly painted.

The people were not greatly dif-

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ferent from people anywhere else despite their bizarre costumes and customs. At one point I asked directions from a fierce-looking peace officer armed with an obsidian axe. He looked me over idly and told me the way, speaking with the eternal superciliousness that so infuriates the countryman come to the Big City in any time, any place.

The Temple of the Sun, when I finally reached it, proved to be as awesome as it had appeared from the distance—even to a man of the twenty-first century. It was flanked by other massive structures but compared to its bulk, they seemed like pebbles or children's toys. The major avenues of the city were laid out in such a way that they converged and formed a great plaza around the Temple, in which one could stand and watch a constantly changing troop of black-robed priests parade up and down the pyramid's flower-hung terraces.

I was not the only sightseer. On my right a chubby farmer was telling his young son, "And they say that the Sun God comes right down on top. Quite a lot different from our little temple at home, eh? I don't see how they can tell which priest is which. Those must be the acolytes there on the end. Maybe we'll see your brother."

Another couple, man and wife apparently, were trying (unsuccessfully) to sound sophisticated. "There certainly isn't anyone at home who would believe this," the man said sagely.

"No," his wife agreed, "there's no comparison with the little buildings back there, although I suppose it's just a matter of having more people to do the work. I do wish your brother could see this, he with his 'grand' house."

After a while I decided it was time to get down to business. I wanted to find out before dark where Quetzalcoatl lived but I didn't want to attract attention to myself by asking questions in public.

The Toltecs were very fond of pulque, a sort of beer, and the city was liberally supplied with small bars; in later years they would even make a ceremony of getting drunk. I had noticed one place in particular, near the Great Temple, that seemed to cater to visiting farmers and pilgrims and decided that it would be a good place in which to make inquiries.

It might seem dangerous for a jumper to go into a bar (McNaulty would have a seizure just thinking about it) but actually it's one of the safer ways to obtain information. Not only is it easy to strike up a conversation, but people expect to run across an occasional oddball inside, so any slip-up you make is likely to be ignored. Of course you have to watch yourself, especially with unfamiliar drinks—like pulque.

The nameless little tavern near the Temple was identical in most respects to its counterparts throughout the ages: a dark hole thick with stale tobacco smoke and idle conversation. There were about ten people sitting on low benches sipping pulque from pottery mugs, and a crafty bartender was stationed next to a wooden vat.

I bought a mug of pulque and looked the crowd over, finally settling on a tall, long-faced man sitting alone in a corner. He was dressed

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as a farmer and seemed safely drunk.

I strolled over to his bench. "Good harvest, Freeman," I toasted him after sitting down.

He nodded at me and took a pull on his mug. "You too, Friend."

We both sat sipping quietly for a while. I was trying to decide whether or not I liked pulque. It had a rather sweetish taste and the toned-down bite of tequila. I decided I liked it fine.

"You a farmer, Friend?" the man asked me after a bit.

"Oh, yes. Best beanfields in the south, that's me. I've come up for a look at the city, to see how you do things around here."

"Well, you'll see the best place in the world," he said earnestly, sounding like a twenty-first-century Rotarian. "No place anywhere like Teotihuacan! The name's Huachixixal. I farm a place just down the valley, best land in the world."

"I'm Mazatl," I said, hoisting my drink, "and I'd have to agree with you that what I've seen is far and away better than things down south. Why, your temples—"

"Another pulque, Mazatl? I've got some time to kill and I'd like to hear about the southern lands. I've heard you've had a dry time of it the past few years."

"Oh, yes," I adlibbed furiously, "awful dry. Everybody blames the local priests, cutting corners on the ceremonies and all. But say, what's this I hear—sure, I'll have another—what's this I hear about the Feathered Serpent, a white-skinned man or something?"

"It's true," Huachixixal said, nodding solemnly and motioning for the barkeep to refill our mugs. "Everyone talks about him, the priests say he may be a god. But as I was saying, don't you do much irrigation down there? I've heard that you have more slaves than you know what to do with."

"Well, yes and no. We have a time of it with them. Lazy, you know."

"Oh, do I know! Why, I've got a bandy little worker that, if he wasn't so good at harvest, I'd trade in a minute. Lazy! Why, I'll come up on him sometimes under a tree sound asleep. He belonged to my father before me or I wouldn't keep him a minute, no good at all. And you say you've got the same problems?"

It went on like that for nearly an hour. Huachixixal liked to talk but he was very hard to lead. I did learn that Quetzalcoatl lived on a street near the Great Temple; that, yes, you could visit his house; and that nobody had seen him in public lately. This last was disturbing.

I should have left him then and there but we got to talking about this and that and I lost track of time. Of course what happened subsequently was the fault of the pulque—potent stuff like that doesn't have a right to be so smooth. That, and the dangerous familiarity with a language that hypno-cramming gives you.

The trouble started when Huachixixal said something about training coatimundis (I'm still not sure how we got off on that subject) and I disagreed and did what is quite natural when one has hypnoed a language: I translated a slang phrase. I said, "That's all true, but

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don't you think it's putting the cart before the horse?"

Now Nahuatl had a word for sledge, or travois, that translated nicely into cart but there was no equivalent for horse. As a result, the word came out—quite automatically—in untranslated English.

Huachixixal blinked his eyes and repeated, "Horsl? What's a horsl?"

"Oh," I said, still thinking of the point I was trying to make, "it's a, you know, an animal that pulls things and—" and then I stopped dead. I wished I *were* dead. I wished Huachixixal was dead. What had I done?

Huachixixal was mulling it over. "An animal that pulls things, now that's an idea. Why didn't I ever think of that? You southerners must save a lot on slaves that way. What do you use, a—"

"Forget it," I said, trying to sound offhand. "What was that you were saying about coatis and avocado trees?"

"Oh, I was just talking. You know, Mazatl, I wouldn't mind getting one of those horsls. It might be a big help—say, you don't look so good."

I'm sure I didn't look so good. The first thing you learn as a jumper is that the worst blunder you can make, aside from killing somebody famous, is to let slip any technological information. Even the most trivial bit of data can have a profound effect on history—and I had just given away the idea that animals can be domesticated for work. If the Toltecs and the later Aztecs knew that, *they* might not be a dead-end but *I* sure would be.

I had to think fast. Killing Huachixixal was out of the question for several reasons but I would have to keep him quiet. I almost reached into my bag for the snatcher but the sudden thought of McNaulty's reaction to a wasted jump stopped me and I forced myself to calm down.

There was no need to abort the whole job; after all, nothing had really happened yet. Maybe Huachixixal would forget all about horsls when he sobered up and as long as he didn't start drawing plans for bridles and stagecoaches, I might be able to sneak by on my luck. And anyway, I realized rather sickly, I had already passed the four-minute delay. I might as well try to finish what I had started.

"You know, Huach," I said as calmly as possible, "I'd like to go see this Quetzalcoatl now. You said he lives near here."

"I don't know, Mazatl. It must be pretty late—"

"No, it's still early afternoon. I just want to stop in to see him—it is all right, isn't it?"

"Well, yes, but I don't know—"

"Then it's settled. I'll tell you, once we southerners get an idea in our heads, we just have to follow through on it. We can finish our talk later. I'll buy you a drink when we get back, all right?"

"I guess so. It can't hurt just to stop by."

"No, of course not. The thing is, everybody at home told me to see him if I got the chance."

I stood up while I talked, surprised at my unsteadiness. Huachixixal followed me outside; he still looked slightly worried but he was too drunk to argue.

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We wandered through a confusing checkerboard pattern of crowded streets until I was sure that Huachixixal had lost his way. But finally we stopped in front of a small house with, I was delighted to see, a large stone cross over the door.

"That's it, Mazatl, but do you still think we ought to go in? I mean, somebody might think we're too drunk."

Being that near my goal, with no priests or guards around, I was in no mood to argue with him and so I nodded and said hurriedly, "You're right, Huach, absolutely right. What we'll do is, we'll go in one at a time. That way no one will notice anything unusual. You wait here."

Before he could do more than blink, I clapped him on the shoulder and headed into the house.

A thick curtain screened the doorway but there was no real door. I knocked loudly on the masonry and a woman's voice called out: "Yes, who is it now?"

I pushed aside the curtain and stepped into the house. Facing me, sitting on a low couch, was a chestnut-haired woman in her mid-twenties; she did not look friendly.

"What do you want?" she snapped. "Why don't you leave me alone? I can't bring him back. Leave me alone!" I stepped closer and she smelled the pulque on my breath. "My God!" she exclaimed in Gaelic. "He's drunk! Go away, damn you, go away!"

"Quiet," I said, switching languages as rapidly as she did. "I have to see Brendan."

She was silent then and just stared at me. Finally she crossed herself and muttered a prayer. "Who are you? I have never seen you before."

"I am a white man, a Christian like yourself. I've come for Brendan, come to take him home. Where is he?"

There was a note of hysteria in her voice as she wailed, "He's gone, haven't I already told you that? Won't you understand? He left. He's not coming back!"

I felt an unpleasant chill creep up my spine. "But who are you?" I asked stupidly.

"I am his daughter, Bridget. You must know that. Are you all crazy?"

I did a double-take and revised my concept of early Irish saints considerably. "Look, I told you, I'm a white man. I'm wearing a disguise. Wait a minute—"

I grabbed the silicone nose and twisted; it came off, bearing with it only a small amount of the skin underneath. Bridget gasped and crossed herself again.

"Don't worry, I told you it was just a disguise. *Now* can you tell me what you're doing here and where your father is?"

Reluctantly Bridget motioned for me to take a seat. "This is all so strange, I don't know what to think. You ask for my father just like all these savages do. They won't believe that I'm not somehow in touch with him, that he isn't coming back." Her voice grew bitter. "We were fools to come here, just like everyone said."

"I'm confused," I admitted. "I understood that Brendan had taken his vows. I don't see—"

"A daughter? He wasn't always a

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priest, you know. He was a fisherman when the Call came to him. He had a family. I was ten years old when he left and as soon as I was old enough, I followed to take care of him. Somebody had to. He was always forgetful and his vision blinded him to the world; I was the only one who would sail with him. Everyone else said he was crazy. Perhaps he was."

She looked up at the ceiling and I knew her thoughts were far away. "I suppose you know of how my father became interested in the old tales of Iargalon, the Land Beyond the Sunset, and of how he decided to carry the Word out there. The two of us set out in a tiny coracle—no one else would go with us—and sailed to the west.

"We sailed for weeks—with little food or water—and finally we were washed up on the coast of this hellish place. The days on the boat, the sun—it all did something to my father's mind. He changed and his prayers became wild, shrieking rantings. The savages here worshipped him because of it." She laughed bitterly. "He thought he had brought the Word to them but they twisted it into something horrible and demonic—they sacrifice people, did you know that? He wouldn't look, wouldn't see, but I've seen. God, I've seen!

"That was five whole years ago. For all that time we have been held here—not as prisoners really, but not as free people either. And then only last spring my father received the Call again. He said he had to leave. They didn't dare to stop him, he was a god to them. But they held me here, a hostage. And do

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you want to know the funny part of it? I'm of no use to them—my father didn't even know who I was for the last three years. His mind wandered and he left without even saying good-by. I might not have been here at all as far as he was concerned. Yet these savages torment me day and night to bring him back. I'm half mad with it!"

She buried her face in her hands and I did some quick thinking. I should, by rights, just clear out but somehow I could not quite bring myself to abandon Bridget. Brendan was unavailable but why wouldn't his daughter do? My chivalrous instincts were aroused; and besides that, I was still just drunk enough to relish the thought of O'Brien's face when I made the introduction.

"Listen," I said hurriedly, "there isn't much time. Do you want to come away with me, back to your own kind?"

"God, yes! I'll do anything to get away from here!"

I already had the standard contract out, along with a pen. "Nothing to do but sign this," I told her.

I saw her face darken for a moment and I knew what she was thinking, but then she shrugged and put down her name in Latin. I stuffed the contract into my bag, grabbed the snatcher in one hand and held out the other to Bridget.

"Here, take my hand," I said.

And then Huachixixal came in. He took one look at me.

"Mazatl! Your nose!"

I squeezed the snatcher and he grabbed my arm. . . .

* * *

One instant, or many centuries later, however you look at it, the three of us stood together inside the red circle at good old HRI. I saw McNaulty's face go white behind his cigar and then all hell broke loose a Bridget shrieked, Huachixixal moaned, "The Gods!" and fainted dead away, and everyone else began shouting all at once.

It was hours later that I finally sneaked out of there when nobody was looking. Bridget was cursing O'Brien in Gaelic, Huachixixal was snoring loudly under the effect of a sedative, and McNaulty was trying to talk to five different lawyers on four different phones at the same time. Somewhere along the way he had lost his cigar. I think he must have swallowed it.

I left quietly and headed for Doctor Ari's. There would be time tomorrow to start getting things straightened out. Luckily Doc was still in his office and I was soon nursing a tall beaker of Ouzo and telling him the whole story.

It was about that time that I suddenly realized I was suffering from what is euphemistically (and incorrectly, considering the time factor) called Montezuma's Revenge; I should not have drunk the water. When I returned from the bathroom, I noticed that my Ouzo tasted funny but it was not until I'd finished it that Doctor Ari told me what he had added.

He may have a great bedside manner and know all about orthopedic sandals, but you would think any doctor would have known that the one thing I didn't need just then was a physic. ★

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GALAXY BOOKSHELF

Paul Walker

The Far Call, Gordon R. Dickson, 288 pp., Quantum, Dial Press/James Wade, 1978, $9.95.
Study War No More, Joe Haldeman, 278 pp., At. Martin's Press, 1977, $8.95.
The Best From Fantasy and Science Fiction, Edward L. Ferman, 273 pp., Doubleday, 1977, $7.95.
The Weirwoods, Thomas Burnett Swann, 155 pp., Ace, 1967, reissued 1977, $1.50.
Cry Silver Bells, Thomas Burnett Swann, 192 pp., DAW, 1977. $1.50.

Cloak and Dickson

I HAD A STRANGE reaction toward Gordon Dickson while reading *The Far Call*—the feeling I was witnessing a miracle in the transformation of a writer for whom I had previously had no respect for whatever into a person for whom I had only respect and admiration.

It happens that way sometimes.

It is a standard rule in writing classes that one should write about what one knows best. But that isn't always possible. What a writer knows best is not always what he cares about most. And caring about one's subject—caring deeply—is the secret of good writing. The cause for most of bad-to-mediocre books I read is that the writer does not care enough, if at all. He (or she) is interested intellectually, or aesthetically (that is, theoretically) in only one or more aspects of the story; and the remainder, usually the whole human dimension, is a vague afterthought.

What we get most often in the case of hard sf is a fictionalized essay, better suited to a technical journal, draped over the bleached bones of a pulp formula plot; and what we get in the case of the more aesthetically oriented sf, such as Clarion manufactures, is a pastiche of *New Yorker* prose with some utterly unoriginal, but always fashionable, liberal sentiment posing as a theme.

But when a writer adopts a subject that he both knows and cares about deeply, the effect is almost always something very real and dramatic, as well as original; for after all, it is his personal view of life, as individual as he is himself. But even more than that, it allows us that profound experience of let-

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ting us look at the world through another person's eyes; to share his own private vision. It is an opening-up of his heart and mind for inspection. In some cases, as with Ellison, is an outpouring, but in Dickson's case, it is a sharing.

Dickson cares deeply about the space program, and he knows about it intimately, and in *The Far Call,* he makes us see and feel and understand it in the way he does himself, and consequently, in a way no other writer has been able to do before. He makes us live it, both as an idea and as an awesome human enterprise.

In sf, the idea and the humanity of the idea are rarely reconciled. What we get is a story with an idea, or a story comprised of many ideas strung together; and in both cases, the quality of the characters, and their relationship to the story's ideas, is purely functional. In other words, the characters do not embody the writers' ideas. But in Dickson's case, this is never so. His ideas and his people are one and the same. He never uses them as mere mouthpieces to convey information in which he is more interested. In having a character tell us what he knows, he also has him tell us about himself; so regardless of how technical the conversation may become, it is always alive and dramatic, advancing the story and deepening our perception of the characters and their world.

The story is set in the 1990's. Six nations have agreed to participate in man's first effort to reach Mars. Political suspicion and competition abound invidiously. Each is determined to have its share of the glory and scientific profit. As a result the astronauts—who are to go in two ships, one captained by an American, the other by a Russian—are critically overburdened with experimental work.

In brief, they go, disaster strikes, and they return, with one exception. That is the central plot of the book.

The plot proper involves a would-be science writer named Jens Wylie, who has become the U.S. Undersecretary for Space Development and is representing America at the launch, primarily because he knows nothing about diplomacy and thus may serve as an ideal straw man for the President among the other diplomatic wolves. Wylie sees the danger in the excessive workload and tries to get the President and NASA to reduce it. He fails. And when disaster strikes, he sees justice is done.

But none of this is what the book is truly about, which is the total human experience of a launch and, by extension, the experience of the space program itself.

Wylie, like most central characters in sf, is less interesting than many of the minor characters; but in an important way, he is the ideal choice for a hero, for he is a kind of "Gimpel the Fool" to the others in the story—in that they view his romantic convictions about the importance of the program as being as naive as his ability as a diplomat. He is a good and knowledgeable man who has to stand by and watch a dream destroyed by the timid and ignorant.

And unlike other Dickson characters, thank God, he is neither omniscient nor omnipotent. Nor are

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Dickson's astronauts. He portrays them as dedicated professionals.

Likewise, he exercises the same restraint with the rest of his characterizations. There are no stereotypes, no straw men. Even the most minor characters come to life, often movingly, like the Russian diplomat Verigin, who has lost his family and has only the love of his small dog, Chupchik, to keep him going—a love that is threatened by the dog's terminal illness. Or the poor little free-lance spy who just needs one more bankroll to get out of that dirty business.

What is most impressive about Dickson's characters is that he has been able to realize those with whom he disagrees without making them caricatures of villainy. The President and his aides, the NASA executives, the diplomats have their own legitimate points of view. Even those like Jen's sweetheart, Alinde West, and his journalist friend Barney, who think his dreams childish, are justly treated. Never does the book become a tract, never does a character deliver a sermon.

Aside from the characters, the thing that impressed me most was Dickson's masterful stage-managing. Every writer has to get his characters from one place to another, to describe them performing perfunctory actions such as answering a phone or putting on their pants, but in sf especially these actions usually take anywhere from a few sentences to one long paragraph, and are best skimmed or skipped entirely. In *The Far Call,* however, I found myself reading them carefully, for Dickson knew his people so well he was able to characterize each of their actions so that they were uniquely their own. In fact, throughout the book, I rarely skipped anything, finding all of Dickson's details of one thing or another consistently interesting. And this is as true of his descriptions of the Cape and Washington as it is of the interior of the spaceships or a local bar. Everything is very real and cinematic. Obviously, Dickson has been there; but rather than give us a cheap "insider's" view of things, he recreates them without self-consciousness.

The pace is slow, but the suspense is cumulative. So much of interest takes place that we are never allowed to become bored. But it is the ideas that carry the book. I should say, the Idea. The space program. What it is. What, and how much, is involved in it. The reality and the dream. The politics and the practitioners. The technology and the teamwork.

And it is here I tend to diverge from his trajectory. Dickson's dream is simply not my own, and I could not help feeling more sympathy for his politicians than he did. As his cold-blooded Presidential aide tells Wylie, there *are* more important things than reaching Mars.

The space program will require a lot of leisure time and a lot of money, neither of which will be available without some measure of world stability, and the real work of achieving that stability will be done by the politicians. It is a job that is infinitely more complex and difficult than reaching Mars, and it is a job that will infinitely more rewarding to all humanity. At least that is my opinion.

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And because it is my opinion, I was not impressed by the final heroic actions of Wylie and one of the astronauts to save the mission. I think such heroics usually bollix up the works, if not actually harm the cause, and the deeds often have the reverse effect of making it more difficult for those heroes who come after them. Real heroes work at their causes all their lives and are lucky to see them realized, even in part, before they are old men.

Nevertheless, my reservations about the ending do not diminish my admiration for this book. It may well be the best science fiction novel I have ever read. No, Dickson is not a Wells, or a Stapledon, or even an Ursula K. Le Guin. But as a novel, his is the most complex example I've seen of a genuinely mainstream science fiction novel. It shows what can be done with an sf idea, and how to do it. It represents to me the best sf has to offer to literature, the ability to make us live the future today and to understand that the future is as much a part of today as is the past.

G.I. Joe (Haldeman)

Joe Haldeman's first anthology adventure is *Study War No More: A Selection of Alternatives,* and it is as surprising as it is disappointing. The first surprise, which was also my first disappointment, was that it was not composed of original stories. This is a piddling complaint, but at this stage in his career, I always expect something extraordinarily creative of Haldeman; and while he has an interesting premise, he could have made a much more interesting book of it.

He asked a number of writers for stories that answered the question: "If not war, what else?" Ten responded. And it is no surprise to me that none of them had a single alternative that was worth a moment's notice. We are a war-loving genre. Haldeman's biggest mistake was in asking the writers themselves for suggestions. He would have been wiser to look for himself; or at least to ask a real expert in these matters, a knowledgeable fan.

My second surprise was that the introduction was excellent. I do not remember the last time I read a really good introduction to anything, but the experience of war is something Haldeman knows first-hand, and his discussion of it is astoundingly objective. Well, not quite, but close. "War is waiting terrors . . . sudden trauma, when you meet the easy killer who was always inside you; when you first observe that a man is only a fragile bag of skin filled with obscene mysteries . . . it is bottleflies and ants; surprising volumes of blood, crusting; dead men's faces swelling open-mouthed to a caricature of astonishment . . . searching smoking ruins for a lost past . . . War is this and worse but, to some degree, we all accept it. We can even grow to depend on it, and, finally, to love it."

It is the ambiguity of war that "torments" Haldeman, not only the fact of war, and all its concomitant horrors, but the fact of his own situation: "The war was kind to me, though (Haldeman was badly wounded in Vietnam)—material for two novels and a pension that used

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to pay the rent."

Of course, he does say things I disagree with: "the absurdity and outrage of war" is not "obvious," but relative. War is not "the normal instrument of (state) policy" but as poor von Clausewitz says, "only the continuation of a state's policies by other means." There was certainly nothing absurd or outrageous about the Vietnam war to the North Vietnamese. They knew we did not have it in us to fight that kind of a long war. From their point of view, their actions, which included the murdering of civilians, and fighting close to civilian populations so as many of them would be killed as possible, was inpeccably logical. And while it was certainly a continuance of our state policy of containing communism that got us into Vietnam, it was the absence of any alternative policy that kept us there.

Be that as it may . . . the next surprise I encountered was a rousing good story by Ben Bova called "The Dueling Machine." It is really a mystery, and an intriguing one, and, typical of Bova, it is told at a leisurely pace in a leisurely, clean-cut style. Like most of the writers I most enjoy reading, Bova is just a storyteller. Nothing profound or dramatic. Essentially old-fashioned. But a hell of a good yarn spinner.

Damon Knight's 1954 "Rule Golden" is the second-best story in the book. Knight has established such an impressive reputation as both a critic and editor that it sometimes slips our minds that he is also a fine fiction writer, and this story is one of his best.

The remainder of the stories I did not care for. Harlan Ellison's "Basilisk" is interesting, if more for its excesses than its ideas. It has the old Ellisonian power and imagistic magic, but I think if anyone else had written it, I would call it racist and obscene.

The race, in Ellison's case, is White Anglo-Saxon Protestant American (working and middle classes variety) upon whom he lavishes hatred and contempt with manic fervor.

The obscenity is in his equally maniacal, and revoltingly sadistic, infatuation with violence, the most intense of which he always reserves for his enemies.

But I have read enough of Ellison to know he is neither a racist nor obscene, and I am sure he would be completely bewildered by my use of the terms. What he is doing in "Basilisk," as in "A Boy and His Dog," is attempting to think the unthinkable. To portray a character who is the embodiment of an idea as a state of mind. And the effect of the whole story is a sharing of a nightmare vision of a sick and dangerous mind.

It is also, and most profoundly, as in "A Boy and His Dog," an act of personal revenge upon humanity at large. Most people, Ellison feels, can't "be" beyond the ends of their noses. They can't understand why other people are not carbon copies of themselves, and therefore they fear and despise them, and punish them whenever they can. Innately convinced of their rightness, and inspired by their righteousness, they remain oblivious of the consequences of their actions, such as racial discrimination or war itself. Unable

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to think and feel as others do, they live lives that are insulated from the pain and suffering and aspirations of others unlike themselves, and regard them as abstractions.

Ellison hates this variety of humanity, and I believe, through his stories, he attempts to "punish" its members as cruelly as they often punish others.

And he makes the rest of us see through fierce alien eyes the reality of rage and violence that is the lot of the outsider, be he black or white or she.

This, to me, is really what an Ellison story is all about. Not its plot, which is usually familiar enough, or its background, or its immediate theme, which is also usually familiar and fashionable in itself. An Ellison story is Ellison *being* an other.

The problem with it, as with most Ellison stories, is that it is the work of an unexamined conscience. Ellison gets an idea. He works it out at white heat, accomplishing what he intends—which is always the strongest possible dramatic effect—by sheer intensity of language. Then he stops thinking about it.

But there's more to it. What Ellison fails to realize is that in indulging himself against WASPs, or in how he conceives them to be, he is in fact doing precisely what he condemns them for doing. He is refusing to see life through their eyes. Consequently, to him they are abstractions; cartoon people without any depths or dreams. They are less than human, fit to be cheated or killed. What he does not see is that they too are "others." And as a result his villains are never convincing for a moment.

Actually, there is something fundamentally unconvincing about most everything Ellison writes. He is a role-player, who is never content to be any one Harlan Ellison for long. He must be the good guy and the bad, the cynic and the dreamer, and both simultaneously if possible. Unable to be any one person for long, he is ultimately unable to be any one convincingly; even one of the characters in his stories. For as persecuted or tormented as *they* must be we know *he*, Ellison himself, is safe. He is in no danger of going mad or becoming alcoholic or killing someone. He will walk away from the typewriter the same old Harlan he's always been. So we know the intensity of the thoughts and emotions he expresses are not wholly his own. He is just playacting them. But then what do we make of them? How much of all this does he really believe? Does he really feel?

I can't be sure. No one can. Probably not even Ellison. So how much of his fiction can we believe in as an honest artistic statement? Sf writers do make honest artistic statements, you know. Their thoughts and feelings are there to read. But perhaps the question is inappropriate in Ellison's case. Without intending to flatter him, he seems to be more interested in *being* than in having been. He wants to be an insider in each and every generation. To be eternally "cool".

But enough—I sampled the rest of the stories in *Study War No More* and aside from the Poul Anderson, which was only fair, I did not care

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for them. They are by Harry Harrison, George Alec Effinger, Mack Reynolds, Williams Nabors, and Haldeman himself. Oh, and there is a science column on the subject of war and peace by Asimov that was not up to his usual high standards.

As for the cover, I am not sure if I hate it, or just the color brown, but like the book (aside from the Knight and Bova stories) it is—drab.

Ferman's Ferretings

There have been twenty-two volumes in the *Best From Fantasy and Science Fiction* series, not counting two or three odd-volumes culled from all the rest, and they have been, and remain, the best series of anthologies ever published. The present book is no exception. But that is no surprise, for to my thinking, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* has been the best pulp of the lot, including *Astounding* in its golden age.

I know, I know, Campbell got all the accolades. He was the greatest of editors, but judging issue for issue, story for story, I am convinced that no other pulp can match F&SF's record for quality.

Granted, this is not entirely fair, because F&SF publishes fantasy, which tends to be of a higher level than sf; but even so, the magazine has a quality about it that none have ever duplicated. No, not even *Orbit*, or any of the other hardcover anthologies. They have gotten the awards, but F&SF has provided a consistently higher level of entertainment.

How do I judge these things?

I ask only two good stories of any magazine I buy. Even if the remainder of the stories are bad, if I can find just two that satisfy me, I feel I have gotten my money's worth. Ed Ferman has never let me down. Not once. And furthermore, I have never read an issue of F&SF without at least *three* worthwhile stories, and of the remainder, I cannot cite a single example of a story that I would regard as an "inexplicable" choice—one so bad it makes me think the author is the editor's brother-in-law.

The curious thing is that the manufacturer of this lollipop has never written any fiction himself. He graduated with a B.A. in English from Middlebury College in Vermont, and worked at odd jobs at various magazines, then came to F&SF in 1961, after his father had taken it over. He worked for about two years under Avram Davidson, who was then editor, then under his father, Joseph, and finally assumed the editorial chair in 1966. He has been editing the "Best" series since Number 15.

They are issued every two years and generally cover the past two to three years; but this latest covers a longer period, and includes for the first time samples of its excellent "departments." A shrewd and perceptive book column by Algis Budrys; a science article by Asimov that is as amusing and informative as always; and a film review by Baird Searles of the best sf films of all-time. Plus, assorted nonsense that is worth a grin or two.

Of course, it is the stories that make this worth buying. And it came as no surprise to me to find

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that I could not hate a single one of them. Just think of that a minute. When was the last time you read an anthology in which you could not find at least one story you absolutely hated? I can't think of any.

I didn't care for Joanna Russ' "My Boat." It has an excellent central character buried under reams of unnecessary prose. And I wasn't crazy about James Tiptree, Jr.'s "The Women Men Don't See," for which the Long-Drink-of-Water who edits this magazine may fire me (He thinks Tiptree is Ghod.). But then I have never cared for anything I've read by Tiptree. And my advice to the Poet Ray Bradbury after reading his "Out of Dickinson by Poe" is to stop immediately.

Oh, and I did think the lead story by Richard Cowper, "The Hertford Manuscript," was too long-winded. But I enjoyed it enormously. As I enjoyed Robert Bloch's "A Case of the Stubborns." Bloch is an underestimated talent. He not only has a genuinely good sense of humor, but the sensitivity and ability to bring his gentle (and nightmarish) people to life.

I have read better by John Varley than "In the Bowl," but few writers have the knack of giving us the feeling of "being there" as he does. And he is one of the few feminist writers who have the ability to make non-sexist female protagonists completely credible.

Liz Hufford's "This Offer Expires" is a John Collier-type yarn that is worthy of its model. I would like to tell you to keep Liz Hufford's name in mind, and to look forward to her latest work with anticipation, but it seems people who start out writing this kind of wonderful story don't stick at it for long. I expect Hufford's future work will be more "relevant." But I would be happy to be proved wrong.

I loved Manly Wade Wellman's "The Ghastly Priest Doth Reign". And for similar reasons, R. Bretnor's "Old Uncle Tom Cobleigh and All." Both of them could have been potboilers in anyone else's hands. As they are, both are charming and funny fantasies.

My admiration for "Mute Inglorious Tam" by Fred Pohl and C.M. Kornbluth is great. I have always thought Pohl was a fine writer, but I am almost always disappointed by the things he writes about. Not here. He tells the story of a science fiction writer in a time when there are no science fiction writers. When, in fact, the genre is impossible. And he tells it brilliantly.

Less than brilliant, but entertaining all the same, are Harvey Jacob's "Dress Rehearsal," which is more a joke than a story, and Edward Wellen's "Sanity Clause," which is less distinguished company would have seemed better to me than it did.

But far and away the best story in the book, and one of the best stories I have ever read from an sf author, is Tom Reamy's "San Diego Lightfoot Sue." I hate to admit this, but I must have missed the whole point of it, for I could see nothing of fantasy or science fiction in it; but what I did see left me in awe.

Tom Reamy died last year in his early forties. I didn't think much of it at the time, but since reading this

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story, I realize what a loss it is to the genre. Reamy had everything. Talent, sensitivity, perceptiveness, a knowledge of life, wisdom, and compassion, plus the ability to tell a thoroughly absorbing human story. "San Diego Lightfoot Sue" alone is worth the price of the book, but even if you don't buy the book, seek it out, read it. It is beautiful and real and moving.

Two sf immortals founded the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction,* Anthony Boucher and J. Francis McComas. Ed Ferman has not let them down. The Twenty-second *Best From Fantasy and Science Fiction* may not be the best of the series (I haven't read them all), but I guarantee you it is one of the very best anthologies of the year.

Swann's Fey

Listen to this:

ETRUSCAN SUTRIUM: the city beside the forest. She crowned a cliff which became an island in spring, when torrents of melting snow descended from blue Mt. Cimini and clawed at her base with icy talons; and in summer she remained an island, but ringed with verdure—bracken and tangling ivy—which licked the wounds of spring with healing tongues. To the north, the forest crouched like a cat. The Ciminian Forest, it was called on the maps of the region, but the townspeople whispered another, more sinister name: The Weirwoods.

This first paragraph of Thomas Burnett Swann's *The Weirwoods,* although not quoted completely, contains the best and the worst to be found in him. It is, of course, derivative of classical literature; but that, in itself, is not a fault. While it lacks the profoundity, and charm, of an Ovid, it is not without its own intelligence or sensibility. It does weave its spell. It does make us want to read on. And if the language does not always do justice to its models, if the poet's ear fails him more often than not, and what was intended as a piquant metaphor results in a tepid cliche ("She crowned a cliff . . . when torrents of melting snow . . . clawed at her base with icy talons. . ."), he does at least approach quality; and sometimes, he attains it ("To the north, the forest crouched like a cat."). So there is in *The Weirwoods,* as in his latest, posthumously published, *Cry Silver Bells,* this constant mixture of good and bad, which for all its weaknesses, retains my respect and sympathy because it is about the best "try" at duplicating classical mythology in modern fantasy terms that I have read from a genre writer.

Not that Swann ever got near the ranks of a Tolkein or the Richard Adams of *Shardik*; but he was trying to do something quite different, and in its own way, quite unique; and if he was unsuccessful, he was not completely so: the first halves of both *The Weirwoods* and *Cry Silver Bells* come remarkably close to the real thing.

The Weirwoods was written in 1965, then expanded to book form in 1967. It takes place in Etruscan Italy. The city of Sutrium has made a truce with the mythological peoples of the forest. They are allowed to trade in the market on the

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ninth day of every month, in return for which they permit the townspeople to pass through their domain unmolested providing they stay on the one open road.

Lars Velcha is a wealthy nobleman who has lost his wife and son in a raid by Gauls. He has a beautiful daughter named Tanaquil, who witnessed the slaughter of her brother and mother, and remains in a state of shock. While passing through the forest, the father discovers he is out of water and decides to go and get some from a stream in the forest despite his daughter's warning that something unpleasant is out there.

She is right, for he finds more than water. He finds a strange-looking boy dozing on a magical lake, and he immediately gets the idea of capturing him for his daughter.

The boy is Vel, and he is not a boy at all, but a lecherous faun without a heart who bides his time until he can take revenge on those who enslaved him. Tanaquil realizes this; she fears him, and yet she pities him and wishes him set free. But how?

Enter the hero, an itinerant flute player named Arnth, whose talent and beauty win him the affection of both the girl and the boy. Tanaquil persuades him to go into the forest and find someone to help set Vel free. He does, almost losing his life in the process. There he meets Vegoia, a sort of queen of the water sprites, with whom he has an affair. They return to the city to help Vel, but their efforts have tragic consequences.

Arnth saves Tanaquil from Vel's vengeance and the two flee into the forest where they are helped by Vegoia, and more I cannot tell you.

Structurally, *The Weirwoods* is a long short story or more accurately, if more vaguely, it is a tale, a narrative of indefinite length, which could be told in a few pages or a few hundred, depending on how the author wished to embellish it. I read it in two sittings. The first night, completely captivated; the second restless, a bit bored, and finally disappointed.

As in *Cry Silver Bells*, Swann's chief interest is in recreating the milieu of classical literature, the people, places, and things; and at this, he is excellent. His descriptions are vivid and rhapsodic, his characters are individual and strikingly well-done, especially his mythological people like Vel and Vegoia, neither of whom is idealized or romanticized any more than his human characters. Their limitations and weaknesses, including capricuous viciousness, are protrayed honestly and compassionately. The gods are dying, and with them a world—serene, yet not ignorant of cruelty.

It was plot that was Swann's nemesis. It seems the closer he got to the climax, the more his imagination and ability tended to fail him; and by the conclusion, he seemed to want to wrap things up as quickly as possible. His nightmare climax in *The Weirwoods* is a ho-hum affair; he just did not have the knack to write action scenes. And the story went on too long after the action had ceased. He had a lot to accomplish in getting his characters to safety and then getting the story to

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the death of Vegoia, and he did not know how to do it. As in the death of the hero of *Cry Silver Bells,* it happens abruptly and does not seem to be a natural consequence of the action that preceded it. And the final exposition is likewise abrupt and complex, utterly out of step with the gentle, leisurely pace of the narrative in the beginning. In *Cry Silver Bells,* it occurs so abruptly, so much is revealed for which there was inadequate preparation, that the narrative's credibility is destroyed.

Cry Silver Bells was written later than *The Weirwoods* and has a much more relaxed tone to it. It begins pulpishly with the human hero, a proud thief, and his beautiful cousin Hora, a proud courtesan, on their way to Crete. They have come from Egypt where their family was killed by a sphinx. Near shore, their ship is attacked by a pack of harpies and sunk. On shore the hero, Lordon, has to practice his trade to earn the rent money, and gets caught. Both are sent into exile, to a town on the other side of the island. But to reach the town they must pass through the Country of the Beasts, the forest of mythological creatures, from which no man has ever returned.

Needless to say, they return.

They are saved by the real heroes of the story, a beautiful nymph named Zoe, who is the doctor to the creatures of the forest; and by Silver Bells, one of the last of the Minotaurs. Predictably, both humans fall in love with both beasts. But their love is short-lived, for to stay they must be judged fit by the Great Chiron, who has never yet permitted a human to live.

Up to this point, and slightly beyond, I was just as captivated by the whole ambience of Swann's world as I had been in *The Weirwoods;* but beyond it, when the action began, I again found myself afflicted with tedium. And, as I have said, I found the ending unworkable.

Reading a myth is like looking into pool of very deep water. First you see the water. Then you see the bottom. And lastly you see the depth of the pool itself. In a myth, the pool is the human mind, the water is the story, the bottom is the meaning, the depth is what happens to you in between the reading and the perception of the meaning. But in Swann, there is really only the water to see. The bottom is murky. And there is no sensation of depth whatever.

In both novels, Swann is lamenting the passing of the demi-gods, envying their freedom and serenity and sensuality, but cognizant of their often brutal shortcomings. He perceived the poignancy of their precarious situation and the tragedy of their loss, but he was unable to dramatize it. What he left us were shadows of much greater books.

P.S. A word for the all too few illustrations of George Barr for *Cry Silver Bells:* charming. Even if you don't want to buy this book, have a look at page 151. The cover, unfortunately, is the least interesting of the drawings.

Another word for the cover of *The Weirwoods* by Stephen Hickman: exquisite. That's got to be Vegoia. Notice the posture of the hands. ★

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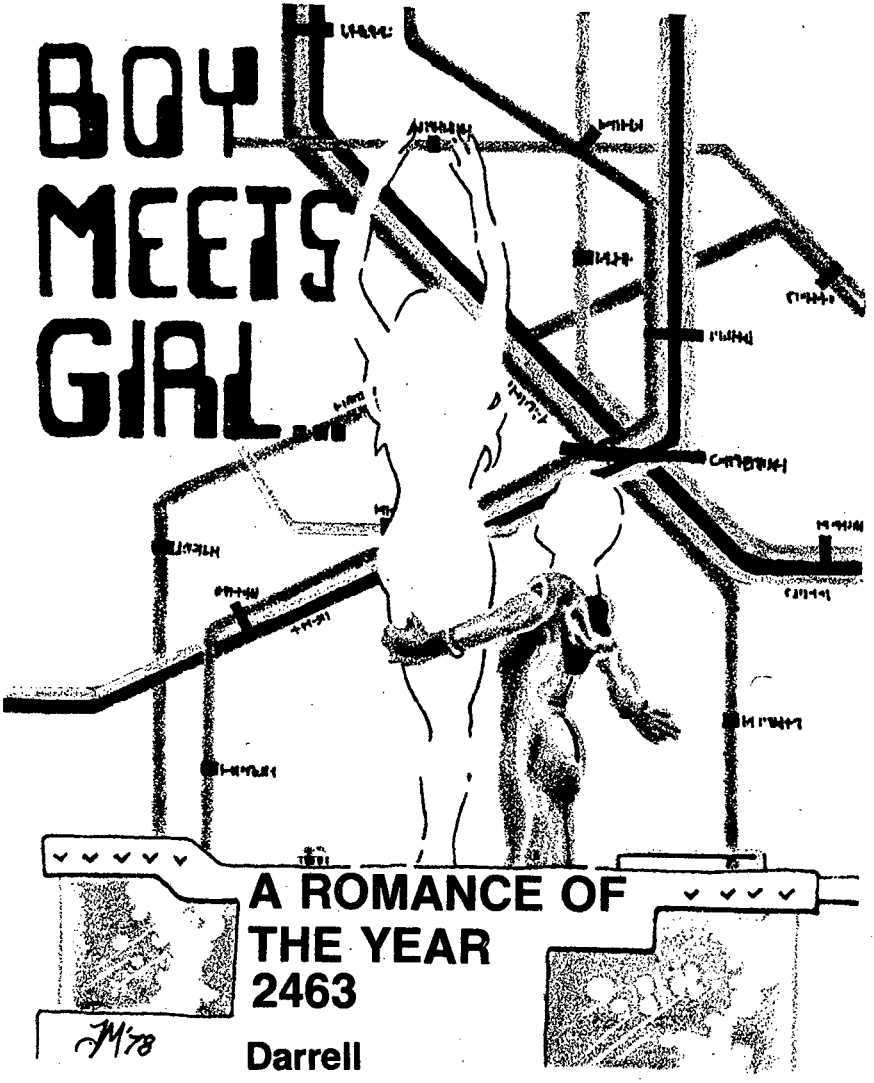
BOY MEETS GIRL



A ROMANCE OF THE YEAR 2463

Darrell Schweitzer

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He had led a sheltered life, of course, but he didn't have reason to think he was bad at his job. . .

HE MET HER on the tubeway on the way to work.

It was his first day out from the Home, and that morning the Sisters had given him an especially strong sermon on the evils of the worldly life. That was why he was upset when a beautiful girl sat down on the seat beside him. Apart from the Sisters, who seemed to supersede all considerations of gender, this was the first member of the opposite sex he had ever seen.

Sweat gathered on his forehead and he began to tremble nervously, bracing himself for an assault of carnal temptations the Sisters had warned him against.

"Hi," she said. "On your way to work?"

He thought it best to try to remain calm so that he might maintain control of the situation. The last thing he wanted to do was to let her find out that he was afraid of her. So in a noble attempt at a casual tone, he answered:

"Yes, I am. First day on my new job."

"Oh, what a coincidence! This is my first day too. I work at the sewage cannery. Where are you going?"

It had been a mistake to let on that it was his first day. A bad one. Now she knew that he was inexperienced. Still, he must not show any alarm.

"To the baby factory."

"Guess you and I must have finished Training on the same day."

"Guess so."

"Tell me, are babies really made in bottles there?"

"They certainly are, and tailored to specifications. That's one of the wonderful things about all this. Satisfaction or your money back."

"What kind of specifications?"

"Well, you know. The Neo-Catholics want them one way and the Bacchanalians want them another and the civil-service people still another. I'm sure it'll be a fascinating job. I can't wait to get started."

They talked on and gradually he let his guard down. All the dire things the Sisters had said would happen didn't. He even came to like her. She was a good listener and before long the conversation was almost entirely one-sided. He delighted in finding someone to whom he could talk. At the Home his teachers would always disconnect the address system at his desk and that would be that. But here, for the first time, was someone who actually seemed interested in him and asked him in-

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telligent questions.

After a while he was no longer uneasy with her and, in fact, he began to wish that she would transfer to the baby factory and work with him. By the time the train was ten units across the trans-city grid, he could not see how he could ever live without her.

In other words, it was love at first blab.

* * *

Just as the train pulled into her stop, it blew up: the work of a mad bomber. While the psych-police claimed that only a statistically infinitesimal number of people indulged in such acts any more, among New York's forty-two millions there were certainly enough screwballs to go around. Besides, one was enough.

The tube-car flipped over and landed on end. Many of the passengers were torn into pieces or twisted like pretzels. Bodies were strewn everywhere.

He survived, but she did not. After the clean-up men arrived and gathered all they could find of her body and put the remains in a bottle, he asked to claim the body, and they gave him permission. He slipped the bottle into his pocket and went on to work, having first obtained a police pass to excuse his lateness.

That night when the shift ended, he did not go home. He had more important things to do and he headed straight for the men's room. Disconnecting the alarm system, he hid there in a stall until he was sure the building was empty. Then he slipped out, and using an electronic gadget he had made illegally from spare parts that day when no one was looking, he disabled the nightwatch robot.

He went down to the production tank and turned on the computer, the auxiliary tanks, the pumps and the warmer, after having carefully stuffed an old sock in the power-abuse warning system.

* * *

By four o'clock in the morning he had finished the job. A little green light activated and the lid of the coffin-shaped tank slid back, revealing the girl he had met on the train. She was stark naked, newly reconstituted from the tissue samples in the bottle.

It was true that the equipment was designed to manufacture babies, but with minor adjustments, it could be used to produce adults as well. And here she was. His craftsmanship had been flawless.

Unfortunately, his previously sheltered life had taken a toll of the results. Even after he explained to her what he had done, she did not seem happy. Instead, she looked down at herself.

"Didn't you forget something?" she asked.

"Forget what?" He was genuinely alarmed. Had he made a mistake after all?

She pointed to an area between her legs. He studied her for a moment without understanding, and then it dawned on him. He sighed with relief.

"Oh, *that!* Don't worry, I don't have one either." ★

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CLOSE (CRITICAL) ENCOUNTERS

I. Jeff Rovin

IT IS UNUSUAL that one year should give us the yardstick by which one can measure both the depths and the heights of the science fiction film. But that's what happened in 1977, with the nadir represented by *Star Wars*, that videogame with actors, while the zenith belonged to *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, one of the most provocative and breathtaking films in motion picture history.

Close Encounters of the Third Kind is not a perfect film. Few are. At two hours and fifteen minutes it is a trifle too long; some of the peripheral action is confusing; and there are aspects of the film's extraterrestrials which are scientifically implausible. Nonetheless, the film's cumulative effect overcomes its few shortcomings to produce the genre's first bonafide classic in too many years.

Like Stanley Kubrick's immortal *2001: A Space Odyssey*, director/writer Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* is about a dramatic meeting between humankind and extraterrestrial intelligence. However, whereas Kubrick set his film in foreign locales with people and semi-people far removed from the persona of the average theatre-goer, Spielberg drops his aliens right in the lap of Middle America. Further, he creates a tight bond of identification between the audience and the film's main character, power company lineman Roy Neary (Richard Dreyfuss) by fleshing-out Neary to a degree that is rare in science fiction films. We see the young man at work, at home with his wife and children, struggling with road maps, yelling at an irate motorist, and engaged in other activities to which one can relate. Thus, we sympathize with Neary when he has a brush with a series of UFOs, a meeting that leaves him possessed by a weird fascination with the hazy image of a mountain peak.

Neary quickly becomes obsessed with this vision and only after sculpting a massive model of the peak in his home, and losing the family which fears him mad, does he realize that the mountain is a subconscious implantation made by the occupants of the UFOs, a message instructing the man from Indiana to visit a certain mountain in Wyoming.

Meanwhile, Neary is not the only person to have been contacted by the space creatures, nor is psychic suggestion the sole means through which they communicate with earth.

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Scientists led by Claude Lacombe (Francois Truffaut) interpret signals from space as numbers in a specific terrestrial longitude, coordinates that take them to the base of Devil's Tower in Wyoming—the peak of Neary's vision. There the military constructs a huge landing strip, which Neary and one other person, Jillian Guiler (Melinda Dillon) finally reach for a close encounter of the third kind—a face-to-face meeting with textraterrestrial beings.

Spielberg has a great deal going for him with Neary as his film's Everyman, the viewer's very credible link with the *in*credible. But the talented young director does not stop there. He gives us an engrossing array of supporting players which includes the UFO scientist Lacombe, whose enthusiasm about alien visitations is contagious; Neary's wife—played by Teri Garr, the Inga of Mel Brooks' *Young Frankenstein*—whose middle-class, middle intelligence mind is incapable of grasping her husband's conversion from affable normalcy to consumption by an abstraction; the young widow Jillian, who is terrified by the same UFOs that Neary saw but, like the lineman, is obsessed with Devil's Tower and learning what the aliens want; and Jillian's son Barry (Cary Guffey), who is kidnapped by the extraterrestrials early in the film (presumably for harmless study, as he is subsequently returned to his mother) and who, in terms of audience affection, is far and away more lovable than his *Star Wars* counterpart, the tinker-toy Droid R2-D2.

Fundamentally, then, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* is an engrossing and sensitive story about people and how they react to an event that drives them from the routine to the extraordinary. However, that is only one level on which the film succeeds. There are three others.

Visually, Spielberg's film is an absolute knock-out. From the aliens' curious tinkering with Neary's truck, which causes it to lose all respect for the laws of physics; to our first sight of the UFOs, not much larger than an automobile, as they flee police cars along a nighttime highway; to the climactic rising of the quarter-mile long alien command ship from behind Devil's Tower; to the exchange of sign language and smiles between Lacombe and the head extraterrestrial at the military landing strip, technical supervisor Douglas Trumbull performs flawlessly. Unlike the hectic, fragmented views of the *Star Wars* spaceships, Trumbull and Spielberg dwell long and lovingly on their transports, thus prolonging the viewer's stay in wonderland; unlike the matter-of-fact presentation of the *Star Wars* alien, the makers of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* create an extraterrestrial presence that is both warm and reverent.

Like the story, which is a feast for the soul, a reaffirmation of the spirit and dignity of the individual, the special effects are a feast for the eyes.

The third level on which *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* triumphs is what it does for the mind. If Spielberg has geared the narrative aspects of his tale to the average viewer—filmmakers must

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invariably appeal to a wide audience, or their backers won't give them any more electric trains to play with—he caters to a more intellectual audience with the film's philosophical angles. The main course of this food for thought is the director's homage to both Erich von Daniken's book *Chariots of the Gods?* and *2001: A Space Odyssey* wherein he hints that his alien beings may well have fostered the human race. For instance, there is a striking cut from the chief alien to an onlooker whom he/she closely resembles; the very fact, explained by the extraterrestrials' return of several World War II pilots, that the space people have been keeping a friendly (paternal?) eye on us for years; the similarities between our bodies and those of the aliens—they are hairless, as though humans are the midway point between the apes and the extraterrestrials; the subtle sequence, early in the film, in which the Neary children are watching Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* on television, a motion picture in which the Red Sea is parted by clouds that surge and swirl like those that the aliens use to hide their ships—did they divide the waters and perform other Biblical miracles?; and even the throwaway line offered by a technician at the landing strip in which he speculates that Albert Einstein was so damn clever because he "was probably one of them."

As in the Kubrick film, the notion of an alien role in human evolution is convincing because it is presented through symbols and suggestion rather than by citing archeological chapter and verse the way von Daniken does in his frivolous works.

Yet, inconsiderate of this theme, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* gives the viewer much to discuss with his or her private muse. In both the film and documented UFO case histories, the aliens contact everyday folk. Thus, as on *Candid Camera*, someone/thing may one day walk/fly/slither up to you and say, "Smile . . . ", which is a heartening thought. For who among us hasn't harbored the dream of meeting an alien and traveling to the stars, a desire given meat and tenability by Spielberg's film. Too, in this age of conspiracy theories, the movie suggests that the government may be covering up contact with extraterrestrials. After all, hasn't President Carter—who claims to have seen a UFO—asked for a reopening of official investigations into the subject? (Investigations which, incidentally, NASA feels would be a waste of time and money.)

Finally, if there *are* aliens, and they are benign, perhaps they will one day help to lift humankind from the social and cultural quagmire in which it has long been snared. Spielberg has declared that that someday is today, as his space beings take themselves to our leaders, allow their picture to be taken, and establish a common means of communication through music—a brilliant touch, seeing as how music has long been referred to as a universal language; this establishing of dialogue is beautifully realized during the film's climax as the aliens haltingly match tones played on a Moog synthesizer, after which we

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try to mimic their musical patterns, all of which results in a magnificent symphony of harmonious bleeps, toots and blares. The key word is harmonious.

Indeed, if there is any one pervading motif in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, it is that of hope. Follow your star and you will find your dream. All of which leads to the fourth level of Spielberg's film, its preoccupation with the innocence, righteousness, and imagination of Walt Disney.

The song *When You Wish Upon A Star* was written for Disney's 1940 feature-length cartoon *Pinocchio*. It was crooned in that film by Jiminy Cricket, Pinocchio's conscience personified. Originally, the sound-track of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* offered Mr. Cricket's rendition of the song as the command ship took Roy Neary onboard and rose from the landing field. A delicate touch which would have beautifully underscored Neary's personality—it is also *his* conscience personified, a succinct expression of his very human sensibilies—Spielberg eliminated the tune because he felt that it nudged the thrust of his film from science fiction to fantasy. However, since the song is so appropriate it was retained in other portions of the picture, issuing from a music box and surfacing several times in John Williams' excellent score.

A second Disney reference is a small red dot of a UFO that is always scurrying madly behind its larger counterparts. This, in much the same fashion as the sprite Tinkerbell zipped and skidded after Peter Pan in that 1953 animated Disney feature. Other such touches include the aliens that attend their taller, slimmer, wiser commander and are reminiscent of the friendly animals that invariably service the protagonist of a Disney cartoon; and the first faltering notes in the earthling-extraterrestrial musical discussion, which are not unlike the interview with the soundtrack in Disney's 1941 cartoon *Fantasia*.

It's odd, but these snatches from the repertoire of a great purveyor of cinematic dreams are rather moving. Unlike George Lucas, who stocked *Star Wars* with characters and pieces of plot from *Dune*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and half-dozen John Wayne and Errol Flynn pictures—to trite and tatty ends—Spielberg used the borrowed elements as flavor. His strong, basic material was already there; the Disney material was simply (and profoundly) the spice that added humor and accentuated the pathos.

It's been a long time since we've had a movie as lyric and stunning as *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. It is a brilliant whole of carefully and lovingly crafted parts; like Dante Aligheri's *The Divine Comedy*, it's a work of poetry, vision, and spectacle.

It's been said that Spielberg drew inspiration from Kubrick's decade-old *2001: A Space Odyssey*, which he was forever screening. Ten years from now, don't be surprised if you read about some young filmmaker who, fifteen years of age in 1978, makes a science fiction masterpiece in 1988, during the production of which *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* was constantly being shown. . . . ★

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II. Jay Kay Klein

A SCIENCE FICTION story can be based on any theme. Traditionally, this has been some aspect of science: chemistry, botany, psychology, and so forth. *Close Encounters of a Third Kind* is something different—it's based on fantasy. Coming out of the theater, I overheard a young man say to his date, "That's bad science fiction!" Not really, I think, just built around something unaccustomed. Perhaps the film could be termed "Sci-Fan."

In a way, also, *Close Encounters* comes close to being in the Monster Movie category, transcending it through better production values and by the movie maker's intent. What the picture does is to center around UFO's, which are the equivalents of the "monsters" in one sf film category. The collected body of UFO "sightings" since World War II form the equivalent in *Close Encounters* to the "scientific framework" of other sf film types. The first half of *Close Encounters* is a collection of UFO incidents that might have been excerpted from a listing of reported occurrences—and I've no doubt they were. In fact, as I watched the scenes unroll one after another, I felt I was seeing a quick panorama of all the clichés ever associated with flying saucer sightings.

These were presented at times in a cinema verité style that approached documentary reportings, in an attempt, I think to link the normal and the paranormal. Ultimately, the film went from merely showing strange happenings to the final explanation behind the weird manifestations. At first, this was done in a fast-paced, cinematically well-handled way. A lost World War II squadron of planes appears in a desert, as if just back from a mission but minus all crewmen. The household of a young mother and her four-year-old child is gripped in a mysterious force that turns on electrical appliances and activates everything mechanical. Something unexplained causes an electrical failure throughout the area. A power utility lineman has his truck and various nearby objects grasped by a strange force and shaken like a rat in the teeth of a terrior, while bathed in brilliant lights.

The immediate result of these happenings is to give the viewer the feeling he's watching a horror film that has large numbers of poltergeists on the job. The scenes are reminiscent of *The Haunting*, a horror flick starring Julie Harris some years back. Following the "script" written by a generation of UFOlogists who have decried the "pigheadedness" of non-believers, the utility worker Roy Neary, played by Richard Dreyfuss, finds his wife not only doesn't believe a word he says but doesn't even want

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to hear about his strange experience. His employer fires him without listening to his explanation of what happened to keep him from fixing the power outage.

Director and writer Steven Spielberg works entirely within the body of beliefs established by those who have made a cult of the UFO phenomena. This requires that no encounter ever be fully documented by photographs or attested to by several non-contradicting and unimpeachable witnesses. Most importantly, responsible officials, especially agents of the U.S. government, must always strive to ignore what happens or actively seek to hide all evidence. The UFOlogists' best answer to those who question if there can really be so much smoke without anyone's locating the source of fire is that the "Government" has indeed established the "truth" of the existence of extraterrestrial beings visiting Earth but has destroyed all hard evidence and subverted the inquiry process.

Spielberg has kept *Close Encounters* as tightly tied to the accepted UFO universe as if he were determined, say, in a nuclear power plant story not to violate any of the orthodox views associated with atomic physics. In fact, he hired an "expert" in the field of UFOlogy as technical advisor, Dr. J. Allen Hynek, who founded and heads the Center for UFO Studies.

As a story-telling picture, *Close Encounters* is generally interesting from beginning to end, though the middle drags in spots, with scenes run too long. The excitement of the early saucer encounters gives way to the director's establishing of mystical connections between the main characters and the UFO. The electrical worker Roy Neary, the little boy Barry Guller, and the boy's mother Jillian share a vision of an oddly shaped mountain to which they are drawn. The film's scientist (gotta have one of those, y'know) also makes a double connection, through a giant antenna dish tied to a computer and the chanting of pilgrims in India who repeat a strange tune over and over.

Inevitably, any science fiction picture released at this time is going to be compared to *Star Wars*. It's a shame that *Close Encounters* wasn't finished a year ago so that it could stand completely alone. The two pictures have almost nothing in common. The first difference that strikes the viewer is the very much simpler type of special effects offered by *Close Encounters*. Mostly, these consist of misty lights vaguely outlining dimly seen shapes flashing through the sky, and sometimes right at ground level. The second commonest effects are bright lightbeams that overexpose the cinema film and cause sunburns to story characters. And, of course, the poltergeist effects that would be credible in a grade B horror flick.

The special effects of this film are more or less similar in style to those appearing ten years ago in *2001* rather than to the technical wizardry displayed in *Star Wars*. Perhaps this is to be expected since Douglas Trumbull did the special effects for both the Stanley Kubrick and the Spielberg epics. It's probably a terrible commentary to say that in comparison to the *Star Wars* effects, those of *Close Encounters*

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seem commonplace and simple. Trumbull certainly did a very fine job by pre-*Star Wars* standards, but his otherwise commendable efforts fall short of the truly miraculous, it's-really-happening-right-before-my-eyes computer technology employed in *Star Wars*.

Strangely enough, while both the special effects and the straight sets seem far simpler in *Close Encounters*, *Star Wars* cost less than $10 million, while *Close Encounters* reportedly ran nearly $19 million. Finally, the supreme special effect of *Close Encounters* struck me as only marginally better than many I'd seen in a number of grade B productions. As the movie was obviously thundering to a climax, I sat in my seat not believing that the famed picture makers, the team that did *Jaws*, had conjured up a *giant chandelier* to serve as the great-granddaddy of all Flying Saucers. (A giant chandelier that is sometimes the size of three football fields and sometimes the size of a city in flight, depending on how the film technicians matte-work caught the foreground-background relationship.)

My disappointment was not that an alien artifact resembled a lighting fixture, but rather that the object on the screen was obviously a fake. Not poor concept, but poor fabrication. It was this scene, too, in which I found concentrated all the faults of the film. Much as in the treatment given special effects scenes in *2001*, the giant model was left on the screen far too long, as if having lavished so much money and effort, the director couldn't bear cutting the scene. The opposite tack had been taken in *Star Wars*, with many beautiful or bizarre shots lasting just seconds. *Close Encounters* has a total of 250 special effects, against 365 for *Star Wars*. The three-ring circus pace of *Star Wars* is one of the secrets behind its success, requiring viewers to go back two or more times really to see everything. Repeat viewers for *Close Encounters* will be far fewer and, I should think mainly confined to UFO believers. I would also like to think science fiction fans far outnumber saucer freaks—but I'm probably wrong.

Both films share something in common: unexpected scene stealers. These were the robots in *Star Wars*. The leading actor in *Close Encounters* turned out to be four-year-old Cary Guffey. If anyone is nominated for Best Actor in this film, it ought to be him. Most remarkably, he did this all with some chuckles, a few gurgles, and that line of lines, "Bye bye!"

The rest of the acting is very competent. The difficulty with believability is that except for saucer freaks, many viewers probably would feel, as I did, that the characters who come in contact with UFO manifestations do not exhibit normal reactions. Persons running into strange and frightening phenomena do not usually pursue the situation, hoping to repeat the experience. Normally, they run like Hell! Still, we may suppose that those encountering UFO effects had their minds deliberatly affected so that they were favorably impressed. In the film, this was carried so far forward as to be completely analogous to the Medieval belief that anyone in the

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presence of Christ's cup, the Holy Grail, would feel instant joy and contentment. Thereafter, he would be a Holy Grail seeker. UFO-induced rapture and its subsequent mania for more encounters is depicted by Spielberg as a religious experience. This is the foundation of UFO cultism, which the film ably serves.

Cinematically, *Close Encounters* works up to a fabricated climax. Conducting communication by light patterns and musical notes is not new in print, but may be a first on film. Let's hope that dragging this out on screen for what seemed an eternity will not set a tradition. The Disneyesque tuba blats seemed out of place as not sufficiently alien. You'd expect electronic synthesis instead of sound generated by a vibrating column of air within a brass spiral or, perhaps, its transistorized carbon copy. A tacked-on epilogue depicts the creatures of the saucer as a group of elf-sized goblins and a wise old cutsey-grotesque Disney-type creature revealed fitfully amidst blinding lights and swirling mist. Amazingly, the apparition doesn't frighten anyone. Instead, the expressions of the humans took on a beatific rapture as if they were gazing on the face of God.

These areas of viewer disbelief in themselves would have been sufficient, but a bus-load of firm-jawed astronauts were at hand to embark on the saucer for a tour of space—presumably. Since the only previous communication shown by the film maker between the governmental group and the UFO was a simple set of landing coordinates, I can't see how these volunteers were gathered days or weeks in advance. Nor, except to fit within the canons of UFOlogy, did it make sense for the government to have hundreds of government-payroll people on hand to watch the saucer landing while denying access on the grounds of secrecy to a handful of persons already in contact with the UFO. The secrecy problem would be compounded, of course, by the hundreds of Earth detainees disgorged from the saucer after years of captivity.

So much for the apparent failures of rationality, including a multi-million candle-power UFO appearing secretly in the sky when it ought to be detected as it rounded Saturn's orbit. The picture as a whole is entertaining. Despite affinities with previous low-budget monster movies, use of now outmoded special effect techniques and various failures of logic, *Close Encounters* is far from being a bad picture. In fact, it is better than any made-for-TV movie I've yet seen, and it's even better than the majority of science fiction films that have been produced for the screen.

The picture *is* far below *Star Wars* and, again, if there is any tragedy here, it's Steven Spielberg's production's having followed George Lucas' film instead of preceding it. The situation is somewhat like an epic silent film of the 1920's being released on the heels of the all-talking, all-singing *Jazz Singer*. On the other hand, I've no doubt the picture is attractive enough to enhance the value of Columbia Pictures stock. And *Close Encounters of The Third Kind* ought to gladden the heart of every UFO freak. ★

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DIRECTIONS

Dear Mr. Pierce,

I have a bone to pick with your book reviewer, Paul Walker. He views the bull as a powerful animal and the matador as a defenseless human trying to overcome the bull's sharp horns. Apparently Mr. Walker missed the picadors and their lances as they wound and weaken the animal by bleeding him. As for true adversity I suggest Mr. Walker try grizzly bear hunting with an axe.

David Friese

11823 Five Cedars Rd.
Pineville, N.C. 28134

But the bull is a powerful animal. And the matador's task is not to overcome it, but to control it. The purpose of the picadors is not to weaken the bull, but to teach it to strike upward with its head, as I recall. This is a preparation, not an end in itself, and if anything, leaves the bull more fighting mad than ever.

As for your latter suggestion, that is simply axing for trouble.

—Paul Walker

Gentlemen:

As a long time resident of Norristown, Pa., I really must object to the line in Herbert Gerjuoy's "The Holy Temple" referring to the nut factory in my town.

We do have a nut house, i.e. the State Hospital, but we *do not* have a nut factory! The nut factory is in Conshohocken, Pa. Please forward this information to Mr. Gerjuoy. Thank you.

P.L. Brooks

Morris Road, R.D. #3
Norristown, Pa. 19401

Sir:

I found your reviews on *Star Wars* interesting, but neither of your reviewers seemed to question the historical sources of the script. SF fans have missed the point that this is also a WAR movie.

It is, in fact, probably the most accurate illustration of the true background of World War II yet to achieve popularity with the American public.

This goes back to the suppression of the Samurai, in the Meiji Restoration in 1868, when the Central Japanese government was established. That should be the key, in and of itself. A remote figurehead Emperor, but the real power resting in the hands of rabidly militaristic expansionists? Plot sound familiar?

The assassinations of the Jedi Knights? What about those assisinations of the opponents of expansionism in the 1930's? Yamamoto was on a sticky wicket, warning the Japanese high command about America's superior technology!

Obviously, if you take the trouble to look, Alderaan begins to look an awful lot like Pearl Harbor, and The Death Star and awful lot like the mastononic fleet the Japanese sent after Midway, where suicidal American torpedo attacks—and American Kamikaze dies on Japanese warships—led the Japanese to rate Americans in the same class as their own Samurai.

It is interesting to note that one of the

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most remarkable qualities of *Star Wars* is that an American made movie should, in so many respects, parallel World War II in the Pacific theater—as now seen by the Japanese!

As to criticisms of the technical background, even that is part of our history; many of the American aces were literally flying farm boys, who got their first lessons, from barnstormers. As to Han Solo, in many ways, he represents an image of America held by most of the world, in the 1930's: the hotrodder, the "decadent" youth of the materialistic, money-crazy society.

Reviewing Star Wars as a "pure" SF film makes about as much sense as reviewing *The Lord of the Rings* as a "fairy tale." No one not fully familiar with World War II military history could miss the unique way in which this film has captured the broader sense of the war.

The full dramatic content of this film, the subliminal or subconscious chords it strikes, can only be evaluated in the context of the age in which it was created.

It will be interesting to see how Japanese audiences, with their traditional appreciation of symbolism, will react to the film; given the above factors, the film may become the biggest American blockbuster in Japan, since MacArthur elected himself god of *demokorasu*.

James J. Glackin

19½ N. Fair Oaks Ave.
Pasadena, Calif., 91103

Now I've heard everything. Well, I hope this doesn't actually hurt 20th Century Fox in Japan!

—j.j.p.

Dear J.J.:

I have a few comments about the November '77 GALAXY.

"Jogging up Main Street" is in most respects very well written, but unfortunately is based upon scientifically inaccurate premises—a cardinal sin in science fiction. The author does not understand a basic principle of physics: in a closed system, angular momentum is conserved. Jogging inside a space-going cylinder could create fluctuations in the spin, but certainly not the progressive spin increase depicted in the story. If you don't believe me, check with your expert-in-residence, Jerry Pournelle. As editor, you should insist on scientific accuracy.

I am delighted by *The Courts of Chaos*. The Amber series would perhaps be more appropriately called "metaphysics fiction" rather than science fiction, but whatever you call it, it is marvellously good.

"The Holy Temple" deserves a special compliment; I enjoyed this brilliant display of wit.

David Palter

6731 Leland Way, Room 103
Hollywood, Calif., 90028

Yeah, I did check in with Jerry on "Jogging"—after *that howler had already been called to my attention. Actually, Jim Baen bought the story, but the error would have gone right past me, too—I'm even less a physicist than he is. Hey Tom, that was a* wild *thing to do. Tom*?

By the way, people have been asking if The Courts of Chaos *is really the last of the Amber series. Well, Roger himself says so. 'Course, authors have been known to change their minds before. . . .*

—j.j.p.

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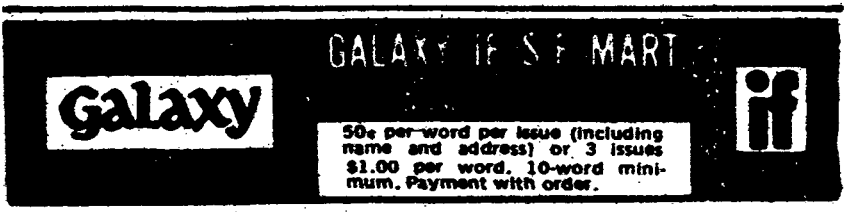
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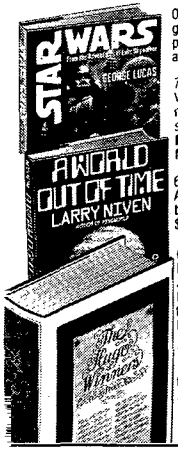

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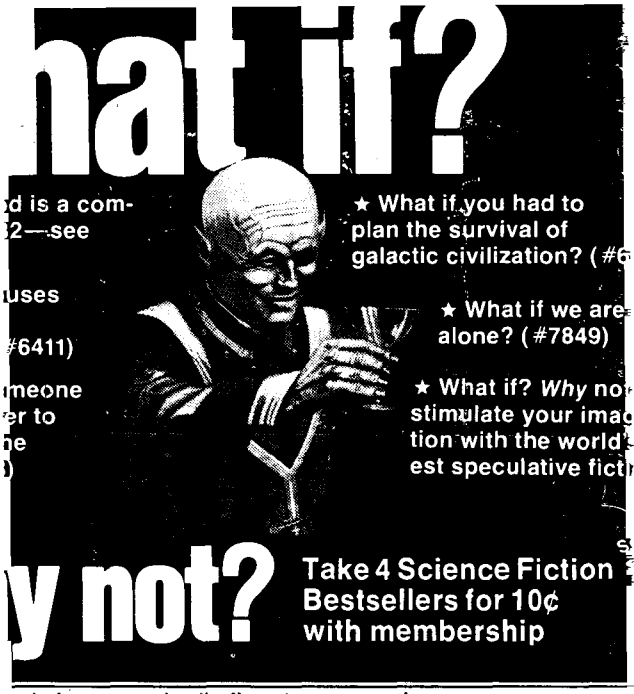
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